ANCIENT FIRES

I. A. R. WYLIE

Howard Mayne

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE DARK HOUSE
THE SHINING HEIGHTS
TOWARDS MORNING
CHILDREN OF STORM
ROGUES AND COMPANY
HOLY FIRE

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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BY

I. A. R. WYLIE

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PROLOGUE

THE twelve stood up. And then for an unendurable second they did not move but remained there staring in front of them with an odd helplessness. I think for the first time they realized that something enormous was happening and that they were little everyday people. Up till then it had been hard for any of us to realize the underlying significance of it all. The drab-coloured stuffy court was so much ours, so ordinary. We knew each other so well. It was like a family gathering. In vain Sergeant Baxter threw out his big chest and refused to recognize us. We knew him for our paternal friend who waved us to safety at the High St. corner—positively dangerous on Market Day — and murmured unofficial warnings when we rolled in after dark with our rear lamp fused. Difficult to recognize in him the instrument of tragic justice. Up in the gallery too were rows of familiar faces—comically like white and shining plates ranged on a kitchen dresser—and there wasn't a stranger in the crowd that had wedged itself in behind that raised central figure like an invading army of which he was the triumphant leader. For everyone in Stoneborough who had elbows to fight with was there—Sam Willett, our butcher whose brown protuberant eyes only brightened to intelligence over the question of good English mutton versus

"that there imported stuff," and the bookseller, Mr. Jones, our authority on the latest fiction, so dried-up and frail it was a wonder he hadn't been trampled underfoot in the melée and so respectable that you wouldn't have expected to find him here at all. And women too—shop-girls from Edwards' Emporium, farmhands, and some of the sullen young men of no particular occupation who brooded about our quiet streets—all out to make a holiday of this thing. Or no—that isn't fair to them. They were serious enough—dead serious. There was even a sort of sober threat in their docile silence—an honest warning—"You play the game, there. We've got an eye on you." For this was very much their business. This was their man. And if now for a vital second they seemed oddly lifeless and insignificant—like a painted-in background in a vivid portrait—it was because he was stronger than all of us put together. They were afraid and he wasn't. It seemed to us that a destructive, ruthless force had been let loose by these suave, bewigged gentlemen in the well of the court which no one could control anymore. It was out for blood and it at once cowed and angered us with its insolent assumption of inflexible righteousness. But he didn't care. In some strange imposing way he was out of reach.

You would have expected the Judge to be the great force. Set high up in his red robes—a spot of living colour in that yellow-tasting legal fog—he ought to have dominated us with his lofty significance. But all through he had seemed rather trivial—if rather terrible—a rickety old human being of no particular worth—posturing earnestly as God. And now in this queer moment of suspended action he dwindled and faded. If we remained conscious of him, it was as of something tragically ironical. It was grotesque and sad to be so feeble and deaf and near the end of everything, and to have such power.

The nine men and the three women were turned towards the door through which they were to pass to their judgment. We knew them all—decent people who worried through their inoffensive lives and were now thrust into a brief terrible prominence. They meant to do the right thing—that much was written all over their sober faces. They were accountable to God and Stoneborough, and whatever their decision they would talk of it to their day's end and some of them would worry—Miss Jones, for instance, our smart dressmaker, with her spectacles and her non-conformist conscience which made her accounts harrowed inventories of pennyworths—one couldn't imagine her not worrying, anyway. There was Major Macreith drooping like a sullen eagle over her sparrow-brownness—he would do the right thing too, in his own way and without a tremor. But his way would lie clean across established law and order—a short-cut to his own justice. ("Kill him? Of course, he killed him. If he didn't let him hang and be damned to him. Not Guilty, by God!") He and Miss Jones would meet like gladiators. Not an impartial judge either, one would have said. It was strange that the Prosecuting Counsel had not challenged him — save that then he would have had to challenge almost every man and woman in Stoneborough—Eliot of Weir Farm for instance, ruined, they said, though carrying his head high, Samson, the Job-master, and Herriot the smith—all in their stiff best clothes that made them seem the more unreal.

And yet they had power too—the power of a dread weight that could crush life out of at least one living sentient being.

I could feel Lisbeth Gay's tense little body pressed against my arm. She laid her hand on mine. But somehow the touch did not make me happy. She clung to me

as she would have clung to any friendly human being. I heard her voice like a breath.

"Oh, Euan, they can put him out!"

She spoke of him as though he had been a light—a fire. And somehow that seemed apt enough. But to this day I cannot put a name to the quality that made him appear the only really living thing amongst us. I suppose the majority of us just exist—compounds of tradition and instinct—which we mistakenly call individuals. But here and there are men and women who are life itself. They blaze with it and whether we hate or love them we turn to them as growing things turn to the sun.

He was slender—one might have said frail until he moved. Aunt Geraldine, noted for confused but vivid personalities, said he reminded her of someone in some portrait gallery—or of a ruff and an old ballad. She meant, I think, that he did not belong to this century. Not that there was a trace of the primitive about him. The lean chin and delicate straight nose, even the curved mouth, sensual and resolute, belonged to a generation that had ground and polished its strength to a rapier's point. But in the whole face was no hint of doubt or scruple. For all its delicacy it was without that sublety which comes of spiritual misgivings. The small fine head, wearing the thick brown hair like a casque, suggested some perfect balance between desire and conscience which our age has lost. His eyes too had a strange quality. They met yours unwavering but they told you nothing. Looking into them you could not be sure whether he meant well or ill by you.

You could only be sure that he was loyal to himself and to his own fixed inscrutable standards. Often they looked a little beyond you. You would have said that they were

fixed on a horizon above which at any hour a longed for vessel might lift its funnels—or its sails.

He had been looking at the old Judge across the well of the Court, his slender hands clasped lightly on the brass rail before him. Now as though he knew we waited a signal he turned to us and his gaze came back from its distance and held Lisbeth steadily, with a little smile, and I felt how quiet she grew.

I remembered the first time I had ever seen him and how even then I had been afraid.

But the spell was broken. The Jury shuffled through the open door. The Judge rose and we were on our feet, like school children. I heard Colonel Gay muttering in my ear.

"Good old Macreith—I wish to God I were with him to back him up."

PART I

PART I

I

1

I HAVE begun with a crisis. And now I have to go back to the beginning. It may be no way to tell my story, but I cannot help myself. For it seems to me that that brief scene is like a leit-motif—like a highlight in a picture from which every other tone resolves itself into a sort of harmony. He was the accused and the challenger. He defied everything we thought we stood for and something unacknowledged in us rose up to acknowledge him.

It was his fate to be dramatic. Or if, as some have it, events are only shadows of ourselves, then our first meeting of all, strange as it was and comic as it might easily have become, was not less significant. We did not and could not have guessed its significance. It was like being shown a book written in an unknown language, and we were very young—Lisbeth just fifteen and I four years older and Stoneborough was an old-fashioned schoolmaster who taught straight-forward English and had no truck with the modern jargon of psychology.

I suppose Stoneborough *is* old-fashioned. And yet in a way it seems to me one of the most modern cities in the world. For it contains things which like certain heart-shattering sentences from the Bible are final and true for all like—like the Cathedral, etc. Even the people who pretend to be amused at its quaintness are aware of that

much. Winter and summer the Pilgrims Inn is full of strangers. They come from the ends of the earth, ostensibly for the sake of the twelfth-century Cathedral, in whose austere aisles they spent an afternoon staring at the bronze effigy of my first acknowledged ancestor and yawning their heads off in the effort to prove themselves adequate. But the Inn they love, honestly, from the heart. It seems to them after that stern uncompromising demand upon the spirit, so very tolerant, so very human. It offers their country appetites great English joints, roasted as nowhere else, and their weariness blazing log-fires before which they may dream and drowse. Its hospitality is as ancient as the oak-beams which spread out overhead like the branches of a great friendly tree.

Next morning, if they are thorough people, they run their car up to old Stoneborough Castle and pay a shilling at the gate to Mr. Hopejoy who, having hung up a weather-worn notice to the effect that he will be back shortly, accompanies them with jangling keys and tottering footsteps to what is left of my old home. He takes them through the Long Gallery and makes them look at the treasures of each roped-off room, expounds the difference between Buhl and contra-Buhl, the heraldic signs of the embossed ceilings (the fact that most of his hearers are fidgetting to be off does not soften him by so much as one ancestral portrait). In the vaulted Music Room, sombre with historic tragic memories, he lingers most lovingly, his rheumy eyes half closed as though blinded anew by those old visions, and his following, moved to a sort of compunction, tap the Knight's armour by the window and propound questions (which no one answers) as to the relative stature of the men "of these days." But they are not let off. Hopejoy throws open the window and points out over the river, curled like a guardian serpent round

the Castle base, to the green mounds and deep trenches of that other fortification where men fought whose faces are veiled and whose enemies loom out of the mist of history like monstrous enigmas. And Hopejoy recites his tale. Some of it may be true, for he has lived so long alone amid the grey granite walls that he may well see things that are hidden from the scientific investigators who make their periodic descent upon Stoneborough. At least no one can contradict him.

Last of all, as he closes the window, he tells them of how my father and mother died within a few hours of one another of a mysterious fever, and someone, an American probably, says, "Drains, I guess" and asks who owns the old place now. Thereat Mr. Hopejoy shakes a tragic head. A syndicate of the late Sir Euan's creditors had taken over the Castle as an investment (only Mr. Hopejoy puts it more delicately than that). He adds with ferocious bitterness, "It's *them* gets your shillings, ladies and gentlemen," and his flock, thus prompted, go past him, pressing abashed silver into his discreetly waiting palm.

But to most of them Stoneborough is just a relic. They are glad to have seen it and glad to be gone. They would no more think of living there than of living in a museum. But to its native sons there is no other home. They leave it for the ends of the earth, but they come back. Perhaps their hearts never left. I know that here into this warm and sensuous Paradise there comes suddenly a gust of cold north wind and in an instant the lofty palms and gaudy orchids of our garden are gone and into another sky of paler blue and fleecy racing clouds there rises that exultant spire, strong and mystical like the people whose prayer it is. The sinister jungle green melts into the shining emerald of the Close with its gay bodyguard of jewelled gardens, and low-built creeper-covered houses — Tudor,

Elizabethan, and Georgian, that stand shoulder to shoulder in the perfect unity of their fitness, holding at respectful distance the little worldliness of the town and the rich plashy meadowlands beyond. I find myself passing through the old stone gateway into the narrow streets. I peer into the familiar shop (Buffets is still there where I used to buy my pennyworth of acid-drops) and I can feel about me the warm friendly bustle that is never rapacious, never cruel. With other evening idlers I lean my elbows on the bridge and watch the Weir roll down from the mysterious Druidical plains whence comes our race.

And then it seems to me that cast cities may arise and men break into new worlds, but that always when they come here the best of them will be aware of something eternal, greater than themselves and their restless strivings, an ancient wisdom of the heart, a knowledge of the invisible realities of which the Cathedral is the symbol and the guardian.

In Stoneborough we all know one another. I do not mean that we pretend to a fictitious equality of culture. My Lord Bishop does not slap Mr. Simons the headverger on the back and ask him to tea (a piece of indecorum which would, I think, have shocked Mr. Simons into complete agnosticism). But we are very typical in our respect for one another. Even when we quarrel with Sam Willet on the question of weights and prices—as happens sometimes—we never lose sight of the fact that our temporary enemy is an individual with his job and his rights and his dignity.

The Close has always been the heart of Stoneborough's social life. Colonel Gay and Lisbeth lived there in the "L" shaped Elizabethan house under the shadow of the Episcopal Palace. Our house was next to theirs, only we were Georgian, portly and red-faced with fine windows and

generous proportions as became a generation that though it drank heavily and was drifting towards the abyss of Victorian industrialism still had a sense of fineness. Beside it Lisbeth's home breathed a robust Shakespearean spirit of lawless adventure and a determination to mingle prose and poetry as it listed. Its timbers were of all shapes and sizes, and gables and windows and doors cropped up anywhere and everywhere, fancy free, though never where they did not serve a purpose. A privet hedge divided our two households. It was too high to be looked over and it was from my school-room window that I first saw Lisbeth among her flowers. Afterwards I scooped a hole in the thick tough green—large enough for a determined and wriggly boy to crawl through.

Strictly speaking, our house belonged to Aunt Geraldine Fitzroy and Miss Cornelious. I went to live with those two when I was seven, after my father's death, and was very happy. Aunt Geraldine and I were friends from the beginning. To her, I think, I was always a full-grown Sir Euan Fitzroy. She talked politics to me. She took me for tremendous walks which, as her legs were long and mine were short, degenerated on my side into a sort of shambling trot. As I grew older I got the impression that Aunt Geraldine had something on her mind concerning me, of which she never spoke. I remember, in this connection, my tenth birthday, when she solemnly invited me to accompany her to Old Stoneborough. I did not want to go. It was not my idea of a birthday celebration. But I went meekly, feeling dimly that any protest would hurt that secret thing in her. Even old Hopejoy seemed to understand. Our shillings, disdainfully offered, were as disdainfully rejected. ("You and Sir Euan don't pay, not if I lose my job for it.") and he hung up his notice on the ironstudded gate so that we should have the place to our-

selves and followed at a distance like a fierce, affectionate old dog. We went first to the Queen Anne room where my father had died, and Aunt Geraldine stood there a long time, staring at the great gilded bed with the faded blue silk quilt. Then we went on. It was, I know now, a pilgrimage. We stopped for a moment before every portrait, every relic of our old fighting days. I remember vividly standing by my Aunt's side at the window on the left wing which overlooks the battered walls where Rupert Fitzroy and his men had made their defence against a last royalist attack. (For we were Cromwellians, though afterwards my ancestor lost lands and honour because he refused to sign the King's death warrant.) Old Hopejoy came up too and peered between us as though he were seeing what my Aunt saw, and afterwards he closed the window, noiselessly and reverently.

My Aunt never spoke. Occasionally, she pointed irritably with her walking stick as though she were ashamed of such a display of interest, and once I caught her looking from me to the portrait of our Elizabethan ancestor, the first Euan. She shook her head. And she may well have done so. For I was swarthy and stockily built, with black hair and straight black brows and light hazel eyes—like an intelligent monkey's, as Aunt Geraldine had said herself, often enough. The first Euan in his casque and steel breast-plate was fair skinned and brown bearded with a hint of gold, and there was I knew not what violence and passion imprisoned behind that icy exquisite mask. I saw mildly my dimly remembered father in him—the first Euan grown twentieth-century, disarmed and sicklied o'er with thought—but whence I came it would have been hard to say. For even my mother was of the race.

Passing out of the turnstile my aunt said "Damned

Jews," and after that we went home, hurrying through the misty twilight like two exiled ghosts, and still in silence. Yet I felt that Aunt Geraldine had tried valiantly to tell me something which one day I should understand.

Miss Cornelious—whom I called "Corny" with the loving disrespect of youth—was my friend too. *Her* black secret I knew—ever since that winter's afternoon when on my way back from school I had met her running in a deserted lane—not running because she was in a hurry, you understand, but stolidly, earnestly, with her fists up and her elbows down and her short grey hair flying out from under her fur cap. We almost collided and for a moment I just gaped at her, red with vicarious shame. There was no blinking the situation and she did not try to. I can see her now, her wrinkled round face, like that of an elderly baby, set with the determination to have it out with me.

"Shocked, aren't you, Euan?"

I was. I mumbled something.

"Why shouldn't I run? I like running. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes. Rather. But——"

"I'm old. Well, why shouldn't old people run?"

"They don't want to," I objected.

"They can't!" Miss Cornelious retorted triumphantly. "Listen. Can you hear me panting? *Am* I panting?"

"N—no—" I admitted.

"Well, I've run all the way from Hallows End."

Hallows End was a good half mile. Strictly speaking, the fact did not make her conduct the less heinous. Yet I felt myself softening. She stalked beside me, her hands thrust down fiercely in her coat pockets.

"Only babies and little girls trundle hoops—if they trundle them at all in these days. But on your honour, Euan Fitzroy, wouldn't you like to trundle a hoop?"

It was so dark and she was so deeply compromised herself that I owned up.

"If no one were looking."

"That's just it. So would I. Well, why shouldn't we?"

I didn't know. But in spite of my increasing sympathy I was not going to be drawn into any reckless lawbreaking.

"The fellows would laugh."

She made a dramatic gesture.

"Donkeys bray! The trouble is, dear boy, that some of us are born old and some of us are born young and we young ones are always being done out of everything by people who started life in their dotage and are horribly jealous. I shall start a League of the Gay Sixties—I think the Bishop——" She broke off for a moment, perhaps visualising herself and His Grace playing catch-who-catch-can round the Close, for suddenly she chuckled, "Race you to the next lamp-post, Euan!"

I let her win, not out of any misplaced chivalry, but out of an unformed boyish notion that if ever I were as old as Miss Cornelious and could run as gallantly, I *should* have won and something finer than a mere race. At the end she squeezed my arm affectionately.

"Don't tell your Aunt, Euan. You know she thinks its bad for me. Such nonsense!"

I think she would have liked to have said, "damn nonsense," but the repressive spirit of her generation was too much for her. All her swearing was done in her novels which sold in thousands and were full of wild, woolley cut-throats and dreadfully bloody adventures in lands where Miss Cornelious had never been—mainly, no doubt, because of my aunt's hatred of all insects.

The two women had lived together even since Miss Cor-

nelious had earned enough for them to cut free from their relations. They were each other's romance. They loved one another deeply and their lives had been so long interwoven that an elusive resemblance had grown up between them, in spite of the fact that my aunt was large, boney, and dogmatic, and Miss Cornelious small, round, and apparently docile. One knew of them that the death of one would leave a bleeding wound in the survivor's side, and they knew it too. Perhaps when they were younger they had been afraid, but now they said, "When we die," quite peacefully, knowing there could be no long stretch of loneliness for either. They were not sentimental, and they quarrelled. Or rather my aunt, coming across some flagrant example of Miss Cornelious' invariable untidiness, would scold at the top of her fierce voice and Miss Cornelious would say nothing, but wait patiently, her brown eyes blinking from under the mop of grey hair, looking rather like a Yorkshire terrier that has been caught in a thunderstorm and, though dripping and shivering, is serenely aware that the worst thunderstorms do not last for ever.

These two women were my rriends. They and Lisbeth have made up all the womanhood of my life.

2

Her very name draws a fairy circle round me and in that circle is all magic. Boyhood lies far away, but when I think of her—and I carry the thought of her with me like a lamp burning in its sanctuary—I am a boy again with all my power of feeling reborn and vigorous and unspoilt. And if I write of her with the exuberance and exaggeration of a lover, it is because I am in love—shall always be in love.

I stand before my own picture of her and am afraid

lest it convey nothing to anyone but myself. Yet it should have been an easy picture to paint. For she has hardly changed at all.

When she was a little girl there was something grave and wise and womanly about her, and when she became a woman she was still a child with a child's frankness and simplicity and singleness of mind. I feel that I ought to have said, "She is good," and no more than that. But then I should seem to have disparaged her. So few people know what goodness means. They confuse it with stupidity or dullness or even with sheer bigotry—or if they want to make goodness virile they describe it as a strong and noble will battling triumphant against the inner tendencies to evil. If they have a saint it must be a saint Anthony, tempted and resisting. But compared to most saints Lisbeth seems to me like a clear, deep-flowing river beside a muddied stream. In the only way that temptation matters—as a Caliban hidden in our own heart weaving our fate to its ugly need—I know she is never tempted. She looks at evil steadily and unafraid, but it it always outside herself. It strikes no sinister echo in her heart or mind. And so she never really believes in it. In her presence, like a chameleon, it takes on the protective colour of her mind and looks at least forgivable and often fine and daring. Therein, perhaps, lies all our story.

Physically, too, she does not seem to change. When she is an old woman the essence of her outward charm will remain as strong and fragrant because it is so like herself. Perhaps she is not beautiful. But looking at her, the least perceptive feel a very deep and sweet content. They may be hard-bitten materialists, but under Lisbeth's eyes they become believers, if not in God, at least in some unquenchable fineness in mankind—just as they are sure of God and man in that Cathedral

Oddly enough, when I re-create her in my fancy I begin always with her chin as though it were the foundation on which all the rest were built—rather a long projecting chin for such a small face and made the more terrifyingly strong by the mouth, close set with great sweetness and loving-kindness at its corners, the under lip generous and the short upper-lip drawn in a little and irrevocably resolute. Then comes the sensitive, laughter-loving nose, imperceptibly tilted, the blue eyes in their setting of fair lashes, the fine intelligent forehead under the smooth sweep of corn-yellow in which the fire of morning still lingers. No, not beautiful perhaps—and yet very beautiful in that union of strength and gentleness.

Her body is like the rest of her — small, deceptibly fragile-looking with a kind of swinging grace about the broad flat shoulders. To touch her is to think involuntarily of a bird whose delicate bones one could crush with the pressure of the hand and that only waits for release to fly unwearied far beyond the reach of one's strength and bigness.

When I first saw her she was ten years old. The Gays had just come to live in Stoneborough. It was evening and Lisbeth was standing in their garden with her hands clasped behind her back looking down at the broad border of autumn flowers that grew beneath the dividing hedge. And I, inquisitive and faintly antagonistic as were most of the Close people towards newcomers, even the best accredited, neglected my Latin grammar to peer out at her from the school-room window. And suddenly she looked up at me very steadily and said in her soft drawling voice:

"Do you like flowers?"

I gasped back "Rather!" in sheer surprise at her audacity, though, to tell the truth, footballs were much more in my line, and she said, "Come down and look at ours.

You can't see them from up there." And I went, still utterly demoralized, and walked beside her round the garden whilst she told me the names of all the varieties, not one of which I ever remembered.

That was the beginning. From that moment Euan Fitzroy, the young barbarian, passed out of the Stone Age. From a violent, blood-thirsty savage he became a Knight of the Holy Grail, a Sir Lancelot, a Parsifal seeking hungrily for pure and noble service. I do not know that the change was visible to anyone but myself. Outwardly, I was still a black-browed, stocky hobbledehoy, a first-rate forward and a slothful mug at his books. But I knew. And Miss Cornelious may have guessed. At any rate, she remarked that for the first time I began to keep my nails clean.

Lisbeth and I were friends from the beginning. I don't know when I became a lover. Youth doesn't formulate its thoughts and feelings very clearly, and my thoughts of Lisbeth were always shy and frightened of themselves as though by their rough touch they might spoil something very lovely. But I know that even in the first few months, if anyone had told me that she and I were not to belong to one another all our lives and one day in a fashion nearer and dearer than I dared dream of—I do not say that my heart would have broken, for hearts don't break when one is fifteen, but the spring of my youth would have snapped and I should have carried the hurt of it to my days' end.

I spent all my free time with her. We went for long walks up to the plain and on sunny days we sat under the shadow of a hay-stack and she read her favourite poets to me. At first I was secretly ashamed of my understanding and then secretly very proud. Often in the evenings I would go in and sit with Lisbeth and her father in his black oak-beamed study. Colonel Gay had been one of

the most brilliant officers in the Army. He had mounted over the heads of all his generation and it seemed that everything lay before him. Then a laming rheumatism had settled on him and he had been invalided out, in the prime of life, without having once drawn his sword, raging, embittered.

We three played at war together. It was the only thing, except Lisbeth, that struck fire out of his black brooding. We sat round the big dining-room table and with flags and maps and toy soldiers fought each other to the death. Sometimes Lisbeth was an ally and sometimes she was umpire. It was queer how her father had filled her with his belief in the splendour of his profession. She knew every law and technical term of the game, and when he brought me to unconditional surrender, as he always did, I saw colour rush to her cheeks and light to her eyes. And I realised confusedly that the gentlest women like big, terrible deeds.

It seemed that she was to open all the doors of experience to me.

For one day she fell ill—so desperately ill that even now I shrink from the thought of that time. It was my first glimpse of suffering. I think I went more or less mad. I could neither work nor play, and abuse and chaff touched me as little as if I had been made of stone. I hung about the gate of her garden like a stubborn, desperate animal, and when Dr. Cobham came out I searched his face for the faintest betraying sign but with my own face so set and sullen that he could not have recognized my agony. And at night, when I should have been in bed, I crept out of the sleeping house and stood looking up at the awful meaning light in her window, and though it was a bitter winter the sweat dripped down my cheeks and my teeth were clenched as though I were fighting death body to body.

And then one evening I heard Dr. Cobham speaking to Colonel Gay in the doorway and they laughed.

I had alternately hated Dr. Cobham as an impotent fool and prayed to him as a rescuing angel, and now I spoke to him as man to man.

He looked at me quizzically.

"She's out of the wood. You look pretty green yourself. But I've no prescription for your ailment." And then he was sorry for my burning cheeks. "It's all right. You can sleep soundly to-night."

I gulped, "Thank you, sir." Adding in a burst of gratitude "You know—I—I'm going to be a doctor too."

I'd never thought of it before, but now I had made up my mind. If there were suffering like hers and mine in the world, then something had to be done about it and I had to be in the doing.

Dr. Cobham reflected.

"Sir Euan Fitzroy will certainly look well on a brass plate," he said.

"Euan Fitzroy, F.P.C.S." I hazarded.

He laughed.

"You think that sounds better? Well, perhaps it does. But don't worry about that now. Get indoors and have a square meal and a good sleep. You need both."

But I didn't. Instead, I chose deliberately to hang outside the house of one Harry Fielders, my inveterate enemy who had taunted me in my misery, and when he came out I challenged him and behind the Episcopal Palace I fairly pounded him to pulp.

It was a reversion to the Stone Age, gory and splendid, and it did me good.

3

It is a truism that only Time can give events their real significance. Looking back from the height of years, what

were catastrophes dwindle to mere emotional explosions, pathetically comic in their unreasonable violence, so that we blush for them, and what seemed trivial enough stands up like a rocky barrier and we see how the whole course of our life was suddenly turned aside—almost without a ripple.

It was my eighteenth birthday. In two days I had to go up to Oxford for my first year and Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious gave a dance at the Assembly Rooms to celebrate the occasion and also, I think, as a shy expression of their sympathy. (For it was queer that these two elderly women, apparently so isolated from ordinary life, understood even better than I understood myself how hard it is to be eighteen with any comfort or dignity.)

A fortnight before the great event they had carried me up to London and marched me solemnly, like a prisoner under guard, from the hatter's to the bootmaker's—from the bootmaker's to the smartest tailor in Saville Row where I was measured for my first full evening kit. Altogether a hectic astonishing day. For, suddenly, Miss Cornelious had come out of her deceptive diffidence to overawe taxi-drivers, where to go for the best food (and how to order it) and to choose the most correct thing in socks. Shop-keepers had bowed respectfully to her judgment. Eccentricities of fashion she tabooed. Economy she scorned.

"No, no, I object to these childish vagaries with waistcoat buttons. Leave that sort of thing to counter-jumpers. Give me a good cut and the best cloth and plain pearl studs. Come, come, Mr. Simpson, you know better than that——"

I can see my aunt now subdued and almost timid, gazing at Miss Cornelious in fearful admiration, and Miss Cornelious frowning portentously over bales of material

and discussing the question of braided trousers as against unbraided trousers with Mr. Simpson like a high-priest discussing a point of ritual with a fellow technician.

Although the dance was to be at the Assembly Rooms, our house reverberated with the distant excitements. Disorder crept in under my aunt's nose and escaped reproof. Dust settled on Miss Cornelious' manuscript. Our little maid wore her cap over one ear like a signal of distress. There were momentous and secret interviews with the caterer.

The night came. As I went upstairs to dress, my aunt followed me, breathing rather heavily and stammering, "There, Euan, they've just come—the pearl studs—you know what Aunt Cornelious said—I had them made specially—I wanted you to have—the correct thing. Bless you, Euan. Good Luck, always!"

We shook hands very solemnly. I suppose we were all rather overwrought with the prolonged strain. I know when I unwrapped those perfectly correct studs—realised that the pearls had formed part of Aunt Geraldine's treasured earrings I felt myself grow absurdly dim-eyed.

I remember too looking into the long glass, when the last touches had been made, and realising myself from an outside point of view for the first time. And I can feel again the sudden pang of grief because of my dark face and thick-set strength. "Like a beastly gorilla!" I thought. Even Aunt Geraldine had never proved that I was handsome though she had tried hard. "Breeding, Euan, breeding!" she would say with an airy convincing gesture. "That's what counts in the long run. Show me a man's hands and feet and I'll tell you what he is."

So I tried to take comfort in my hands, which weren't bad, and in my feet shining blackly in their new pumps.

I walked with Lisbeth to the Assembly Rooms and I

walked home with her. And in those intervening hours the world had changed for me—and I with it.

I danced with her only once. We did not talk at all. I suppose what happened to me then happens to everyone sooner or later, suddenly or gradually, and that in my case it was inevitably sudden. For I had been brought up in the Spartan simplicity of English boyhood and now I was plunged headlong into this grown-up unimagined life. After all, youth is a pathetic comic thing. I felt so well dressed. People made a fuss of me. I should have been a fool if I had not known that all the girls in Stoneborough wanted to be my partner. For the evening I was a hero. I had tasted wine—a very innocent cup, no doubt—for the first time. There was the music. All these silly trivial things must have played their part.

And then—Lisbeth. She had prepared too, just as I had done. Perhaps she had stood before the glass and wondered. I, at any rate, had not known that she could be so sweetly lovely. And she was in my arms, half a head shorter than I was—so that the scent of her hair was in my face.

It seemed to me that veil after veil was being stript from my boyhood and that I had become a man, knowing good from evil and all that could be made of life. The vague unformed dreams became stark facts. I knew what loving a woman meant and might mean. It was as though my love for Lisbeth, so shy and afraid of itself, hanging on the horizon of our lives like a summer's mist, had blown up to a black storm which had come down upon me, so that I was breathless, shaken—and exultant.

Something violent and hungry in me wanted to snatch her away from all these people into the darkness and hold her close to me and kiss her as I had never kissed anyone —had never dreamed of kissing.

She was a child, really. She had rolled up the red-gold hair for the first time and her dress was a real grown-up dress. But between her masquerade of maturity and mine was the gulf of a sudden physical experience. She loved me, her Euan, her dearest playmate—and if I chose I could wake her—topple her over the edge of her vague happy fancies into my knowledge.

A kind of headiness came over me. I felt so young—so strong, so gloriously strong. Everything was before me. Everything could be mine. Only one had to have the courage to grasp out boldly for what one wanted.

A kiss. Any boy could kiss a girl if he wanted to. I knew that. I had heard older boys talking—sniggering a little.

But not Lisbeth. Not Lisbeth.

When the music stopped I stood back from her with a comic boyish, grown-up bow.

I did not ask her again. I had my duties as a host. But I never lost the consciousness of her nearness. When she passed close to me, dancing lightly and happily, I felt a sudden warmth pour over my whole body. And when I danced I looked over the head of my chattering partner and her face shone through the blur, with frank happiness, as though she was so sure of gentleness and goodness round her, and all the commonplaces I was trying to say died in confusion.

Afterwards when I walked home with her under a late risen moon I was happy too and thankful and humble. For I felt that in some strange inexplicable way I had made a choice which would govern all my life. The violent, cruel thing in me had been somehow transmuted into strength and quiet so that I was at peace with Lisbeth, and the night and the Cathedral lifting its austere and passionate beauty against the silvered darkness.

At her gate I held her hand only an instant, but I heard my voice shake

"It's all over now——" I said like a child.

"We've got to-morrow still."

"If—if it doesn't rain—come up to Old Stoneborough —won't you? A picnic—all day—my last day."

"Why, I've kept it for you."

"Oh, Lisbeth!"

I couldn't help that much or all the love that her name carried. And she stood there looking up at me steadily with the moonlight on her face and in the deep loving-kindness of her eyes, I read a kind of message. It was as though the slumbering woman in her knew everything that had happened to me and pitied me and thanked me too because I had left her to her dreams and fancies a little longer. But one day it would be all right.

"Good night, Euan!"

"Good night, Lisbeth!"

4

Even when one is eighteen and going up to the University one is still very young.

All through that short night I heard the rain streaming down and the wind tossing the branches of our sycamore in frenzied exultation because it had brought all Euan Fitzroy's well-laid plans to nought. And when I woke up the sunlight was lying in a quiet pool at the foot of my bed, and I knew that the wind and rain had been just a nightmare.

I had a boyish belief, too, that a day can be a barrier against the future. This day, for instance, was going to last for ever. Or if to-morrow *should* come, it would be a to-morrow changed out of recognition, its monstrous

round of eating, sleeping, and working made somehow romantic and glorious. For even though I meant to keep secret my new-found love for Lisbeth, this last time together was to be a sort of solemn pledge that I could take with me to comfort me.

Miss Cornelious, looking pathetically elderly and tired and dissipated, helped me to rifle the larder whilst I kept a sharp watch on our good-for-nothing English sun. But for once he didn't play us false. His mild eye watched us from out of a soft autumn mist as we climbed Old Stoneborough Hill and presently left mist and shadow far beneath us. I remember how quietly content we were, a little weary after last night's unaccustomed lateness, not saying much, but deeply aware of one another.

Or was it just that I was so aware of her? Now I wonder. Then I was too absorbed in the marvel of my new-found feeling to question hers. I walked beside her in a kind of trance, not wanting to touch her, surrounding her with a passionate young reverence.

Now and then I stole a glance at the gentle resolute profile and found her dreaming too.

We chose our favourite picnic place—a narrow plateau beneath the walls of Old Stoneborough where tourists never came, and its grey shadow sheltered us from the sun and the cool wind. I was so easily happy. It made me content just to do things for her—little absurd things—to spread my overcoat on the grass for her, to prepare our meal, straining every muscle not to be clumsy, whilst she looked past me, smiling to herself, towards the city that lay beneath us drained in a white sea of mist. Only the Cathedral spire rose above that dead muffling surface like an everlasting sign, so that I dreamed that we were all alone, Lisbeth and I, the sole survivors of some world cataclysm, and was happier still.

And then—well, I was to learn that there are things more variable than our climate. What is it between human beings that can change and shift as suddenly as the wind? A point to the north and where there was quiet sunshine there are clouds and where warmth and understanding a chill emptiness. I do not know. Perhaps it was because I was not really her playmate any more, but a boy wrestling with his first love, that we lost touch. I do know, at least, that in the very midst of our happy chatter about last night—who danced with whom and who danced best—I was aware of a sudden fear. And like everyone who is afraid, I blundered headlong.

"Lisbeth, I wish I wasn't going to-morrow——" Her steady blue eyes in which the gay memories still lingered rested on me questioningly.

"Going where?"

"Oh, you know—to Oxford."

"Don't you want to go?"

I tugged fiercely at the grass. I knew now when it was too late that I was going to make a mess of things. It was as though my love had caught me unawares and toppled me over into a morass. It was trying to make me tell her what I had made up my mind I wouldn't tell her at any cost.

"Oh—I don't know—in a sort of way—but it will be rather beastly—leaving—leaving everything."

"Stoneborough?" She gave her little sweet laugh. "Dear Stoneborough! It's just made to make one want to get away from it—and come back. I want to get away—right to the North Pole—somewhere where nobody's ever been before. Don't you, Euan?"

"Yes." (If I could have added "with you," what passionate sincerity could I have put into that reluctant monosyllable!) "I suppose so."

"Don't you want adventures?"

"Of course, I do. Only—I suppose I'm an awful ass —I'd—I'd like to take everybody with me—everyone decent you know."

"Well, you can't." There was that touch of asperity in her voice which made her gentleness so challenging and vigorous. "You couldn't go lion-hunting for instance with Miss Fitzroy and Miss Cornelious. You know you couldn't."

("I don't want to," I thought. "But I want you.") Aloud, I said:

"Wouldn't you like to go lion-hunting, Lisbeth——"

"Yes—if I didn't have to kill lions. I mean I'd like all the danger and difficulty."

"Well then—" I tried to laugh—"let's go together."

But it fell flat somehow. I knew she didn't believe that I wanted to go lion-hunting or to the North Pole. She thought I was a stay-at-home and perhaps a mother's darling.

"Euan—what *are* you going to do—when you've left Oxford? I expect you'll go into the Army, won't you?"

I muttered sullenly.

"Oh! I don't know—I rather thought—it might be rather fun to be — well, a doctor — or something like that——" (because when you were so ill I couldn't bear to think that all over the world there were people suffering and loving like Lisbeth Gay and Euan Fitzroy).

"Oh!" I could hear how disappointed she was. She saw me at once like Dr. Cobham, prosaic and stolid, paying solemn calls on a lot of tiresome people who persisted in thinking themselves ill. She saw how funny that was and threw back her golden head and laughed. "Why, you'll have to put a brass plate up on the Castle Gate—Dr. Sir

Euan Fitzroy. Consultations from 10—11 and from 3—4. And we'll have to climb the hill every time we've got a pain."

"You won't," I said, "because I shan't live here. It doesn't belong to me."

"But it will belong."

"How?"

"Well—you'll win it back, won't you? Of course you will."

"I don't think I want to." I felt her eyes widen and went on recklessly. "It's a beastly old place, really—so big and lonely."

"But all your people lived here."

"Well, that's one good reason why I shouldn't," I retorted boorishly.

Worse and worse. We waited a moment. She was thinking me over—looking at me from a new point of view. "Besides," I said, "I shouldn't be able to buy it back on a soldier's screw anyway."

"The Nation would give it you." Lisbeth explained solemnly. "They always do."

"Because I won some beastly battle?" (We both took it for granted that in the event of my patronising the Army I should not only be a general but a victorious one.) "Won't they give it to me if I discover a new germ?"

"I shouldn't think so. It sounds so funny."

"I don't see why it should."

"Weren't all your people in the Army, Euan?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"Don't you *want* to be a soldier!"

"Rather not." (Something far braver, far more chivalrous. But the words wouldn't come. I felt badgered and angry. I didn't understand either. How was I to realise what it meant to a romantic girl to live in Stone-

borough with a crippled man eating his heart out for action?) "Just killing people!" I said.

"Being killed." She answered with her head up. "Risking everything."

I laughed rudely.

"That's rot. It's just their jobs like everyone else's job. Besides they're—they're antediluvian. Only asses with no brains are soldiers nowadays."

Then I knew what I had done. The fine swift colour rushed to her cheeks. I could have died too—easily and thankfully—I was so wretched.

"Oh, Lisbeth—I didn't mean that—you know I didn't—of course, there are big people in every profession."

"You—you were just playing down to us?"

"I wasn't. Don't be so beastly."

"Isn't it you?" And then she saw my misery and all her kindness rushed over her anger and drowned it utterly. She put her hand on mine.

"Don't let's quarrel. Not on our last day. Let's forget. I will. Let's be quite quiet for a minute and then we'll be happy again."

She lay back with her hands clasped behind her head and looked at the sky, and I knew she was trying to make herself unhurt and just as she had been before. And I could do nothing. I felt like a clumsy child that had smashed a toy which only her wise fingers could mend. Her eyes closed presently. I think she was really tired, but she wanted to go to sleep too in the hope that when she woke up everything would be all right between us. And I sat beside her, my arms about my knees, my brows knitted, and prayed that some terrible enemy—a dragon for preference—would come roaring down upon us, so that I could fight (as well as any soldier) in defence of her dear rest. But no dragon came, and when she woke

the sun had gone down behind the high plain and there was a mournful chill in the wind that came sighing round the corners in search of us. Lisbeth sat up and rubbed her eyes, puzzled and for a moment almost frightened. Then she saw me, kneeling beside her and looking at her.

"Have I been asleep a long time?"

"Rather—fast."

"I didn't know. I thought I was awake. At least, I knew I was here. But, of course, it was just a dream. I was watching people—the people who used to be here. They were so real. I can almost see them now."

She looked at me with that faint smile that was at once so childlike and so wise. "Can't you, Euan?"

I shook my head. If I had told the truth I should have said, "I can't see anything but you, Lisbeth," but I was tired of trying to tell the truth. I answered humbly.

"No. What are they like, Lisbeth?"

She sat forward with her small face between her hands and gazed down into the dark circle of the valley like a fair young witch into her cauldron. Her voice sounded a little broken and breathless as though she were afraid that what she saw there might be gone before she had made me see it too.

"It—it was a sort of procession. They came up the hill—not making a sound—and went over the drawbridge into the Castle—men in armour and women, too, with long trains and little page boys. I felt there was music somewhere, but I could not hear it. There were peasants ploughing in the fields, but all at once they ran away and I saw that there were enemies coming up from the valley. Then soldiers on horseback rode out of the Castle and stood together in a company with their banners flying. And someone blew a long blast on a trumpet—I could not hear that either, but I could feel it, sad and brave, calling

over all the plain—and the soldiers went down the hill, riding side by side, with a noise like thunder. And there was a great cloud of dust with lightning flashes, and presently the soldiers came back—a few of them—all blood-stained and silent. It was the silence woke me."

Her eyes met mine shyly as though she were afraid to find me laughing at her. But I knew that such things had happened here. The walls behind me had seen them—perhaps if I weren't so thick-set and heavy-limbed I should see them too. I half closed my eyes, trying hard, and on the edge of the dusk, like an exhausted swimmer struggling out of a black sea, a shadow detached itself. For one thrilling moment I almost believed that a survivor of Lisbeth's blood-stained host was limping home from that desperate encounter. But when I opened my eyes wide, I saw that it was only an old familiar oak tree waving its gaunt branches in the wind.

"It's the stories you've been reading," I said prosaically. "I expect they were just a lot of unwashed scallywags if we only knew."

"They were awfully brave," she said.

"I believe you love people—killing one another, Lisbeth."

"Oh no—no—but believing hard in things—not being afraid to die for them."

"We aren't afraid either."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

That hurt. It was true. It was of no use being ready to fight dragons. There were no dragons. But the day that was to have been interminable was running through my fingers like water.

"Euan—couldn't we go in—just once—for a last time? It would look so wonderful in this light. Perhaps we should see what all these people were doing."

It was my chance. I could prolong the day by another hour. And yet somehow I didn't want to. It was an absurd irrational feeling. Suddenly, I was afraid of Old Stoneborough because she loved it. She had always loved it ever since the first time I had taken her up and swaggered past Mr. Hopejoy with his gaping tourists (yes, I had swaggered horribly. I had wanted so much to impress her). And perhaps at the bottom of my fatuous young mind had been the notion that she loved it for my sake. Now I had an uneasy feeling that she wasn't thinking of me—that some enchantment had come to her out of the twilight in which I had no part.

"Isn't it too late, Euan?"

"Oh, not for us." (Swagger again. But I had to remind her that after all Old Stoneborough and I belonged to one another.) "We'll go if you want to."

Mr. Hopejoy, crouched over his fire in the Gate House, rose as he saw us, making little rheumatic groans and jangling his keys disapprovingly.

"Why, Master Euan, the lights 'ave been turned off these three years. You won't see nought but ghosties."

"That's what we've come to see," Lisbeth answered with grave eyes.

"Well, you'd best go alone then. It's all closed now, Master Euan. Them blessed Sightseers went an hour ago. But you know the way."

We crossed the courtyard in silence. The one complete wing that remains of Old Stoneborough faces east and west so that its embattled walls stood like a cliff between us and the last sunlight. We could hardly see the windows that gleamed blackly at us like rows of dead eyes. It was awesomely still. The lovely lawn muffled our footsteps. An old peacock, the last of a royal family, rustled its spectral plumes in front of us, frightened and indignant

at this intrusion upon its evening loneliness. I think we both felt very small and desolate, and my reluctance, like a premonition, deepened as I turned the key in the old lock.

Utter darkness met us. The worn stairway seemed to sink away treacherously under our feet. The air was heavy and dank as of a place on which the blight of forgotten things had fallen. I could only hear Lisbeth moving faintly beside me.

"Better go back," I muttered. "We shan't see anything."

"Oh, yes—upstairs—" she whispered, "the sunset."

So we went on, climbing out of a black pit into a fiery twilight. It came flooding in through the western windows and filled the great suite of rooms through which we wandered timidly with a fantastic moribund splendour. It was hard to believe that my father and mother—modern people—had ever lived here. It all seemed to belong to another race—stoic, large gestured, with a fierce rough love of magnificence. Each room was a milestone on the road of their passing. And now they were gone. Or perhaps not altogether. I saw the worm in the oak, the threadbare pitiousness of the brocaded chairs, the tarnished gilt, the portraits dying into the sombre background of history, the dust of decay hanging spectrally in the broken shafts of sunlight. And yet there was a kind of permanence too. It was as though there were a life here that could never die—that would outlast us all. At any moment we might lift a curtain or open a door and stand confronted.

I looked at Lisbeth. The sunlight rested on her too—on the red gold hair and in the dreaming steady eyes. Suddenly, I ached for her. She seemed so slender—so dangerously slender—and so far away from me. I wanted

to put my arm about her and hold her close to me, not passionately, but as a loving comrade who wanted to protect her in an unknown country. And before I knew I had blurted out a little of my growing trouble.

"You'll be sorry, won't you, when I've gone, Lisbeth?"

She seemed to wake to smile faintly at me.

"You know I will—but you'll come back—— You'll always have to come back here."

I shook my head. I felt oddly that I never wanted to see Old Stoneborough again. I had loved it too—but somehow we had become enemies.

"I'd rather live at home," I muttered. "It's warm and jolly—and—and alive. Everyone's dead here."

But I didn't believe that either. I held open a door for her. We had come to the Music Room. It ends the wing. It is long and oak-panelled and very lofty with a Minstrel's Gallery at the far end over the mullioned window which looks out on to the grassy ridges of the old fortifications. There are brass candelabras and sconces which held electric globes in my father's day. But now the only light came from the window.

We stood there motionless, it seemed interminably. We were both tired and I, at least, was overwrought with the long mysterious conflict of the day. I felt my body turn cold and dead. There seemed nothing alive in me but my thickly beating heart.

A figure of a man stood in the embrasure. That he was one of Lisbeth's visionary procession I could not have doubted in that first moment of chill terror. The western light was on his head and shoulders and on his hands clasped in statuesque repose on a great two-edged sword. He wore the steel casque and breast-plate of that Elizabethan Euan who stared down at him from the wall above and I can see his face now—composed and passionate,

the head lifted slightly as though he were looking beyond the fortifications to the plain—and waiting.

I think I must have made some sound, for he turned very slowly towards us and, though his face was at once in shadow, I could feel his gaze being withdrawn from the distance—concentrated on us with a frowning effort. I knew by the clink of steel that he was real and I went towards him, trembling with anger at myself and him—at my own stupid fear.

"Look here—what business have you—what are you doing?"

My voice sounded boyish and shrill in that lofty silence. I was close to him now and I could see that he was not even embarrassed, but only tolerantly amused.

"I was just seeing what it felt like," he said, "and whether they fitted. They fit me perfectly."

He set the sword back in its niche and lifted off the casque ceremoniously with both hands, and I realized then that after all he was only a boy like myself. Or rather not like myself. For there was something wan and hungry about him like a young hawk. "You might help me off with this stuff," he said.

Insolence itself—but I seemed to have no choice. The situation was so nearly comic. He ought to have looked a fool caught masquerading, but instead it was I who felt ashamed. Underneath his borrowed splendour his clothes proved appallingly shabby. He might have stolen them from a scarecrow and looking back now, I believe that he was half-starving.

"Hopejoy had no right to let you wander about here," I stammered.

"He didn't," the boy answered, indifferently.

"Then I'd jolly well like to know how you got in."

"My own way."

"Who are you anyhow?"

"My name's John Smith."

That was somehow melodramatic—theatrical. It sounded too unlikely—like a disguise that wasn't meant to deceive anyone. He smiled a little, an illusive, attractive smile, that enraged me because it was so disarming.

"My people used to be charcoal burners out there—" he said jerking his head towards the window. "Generations of 'em. That's how I know the place. When I was a kid and the people here were away I used to sneak in—I've come home for a bit. And who are you?"

"Euan Fitzroy" (not without satisfaction).

"Oh." He raised his eyebrows at me. "So you belong here too. Do your people make a lot of money charging a shilling at the gate? Do you want my shilling? Is that what you're fussing about? Because I haven't got one."

I felt myself flush up to the roots of my hair.

"I don't want your beastly shilling. It wouldn't belong to me if you had one."

"Why don't you live here? Is it too big for you."

"It doesn't belong to me either."

"Then you've got no right here."

"More right than you anyway."

"I don't think so. Let's fight about it. Shall we?"

"I—I jolly well mean to."

He laughed.

"Come on then."

Lisbeth stood between us. "Oh—please," she whispered.

I think he saw her for the first time. He stood quite still, his slim, nervous figure suddenly relaxed and quiet.

"Are you a ghost too?" he asked.

There was, I don't know what secret intimacy and gen-

tleness and irony in his voice. It made me frantic with helplessness. She was gazing back at him, grave and wistful, one hand pressed against her heart in an unconscious gesture of wonder. To her he was still someone out of a dream.

"We'd better get out of this—" I said sullenly. "It's all too silly."

He followed us. As we came out into the gallery he even passed me and walked at Lisbeth's side, and I heard him talk easily and conversationally to her. He carried off his desperate shabbiness—the threadbare Norfolk suit, the down-at-heel shoes—as though it were most right and natural.

"It was a wonderful place this, before the tourists came," he said. "I could tell you stories about it that no one else knows. In that room there Mary and Elizabeth met once—secretly. Only three people knew about it and they took care to hold their tongues."

"It's not true—" I interrupted truculently. "You don't know a thing. You're just making it up."

He looked back at me over his shoulders.

"My five times great grandfather was one of them," he said. "He saw Elizabeth. We charcoalers were woodcutters too in those days and we saw a lot. We couldn't read or write, but we could remember."

I laughed rudely, but somehow I was in the wrong again—outside the kind of uncanny intimacy between himself and these rooms that were plunged now in a sombre dusk.

Outside in the courtyard we lingered awkwardly. We were seeking something final to say to one another. On my side it was something violent—aggressive. After all he was a trespasser—I, Euan Fitzroy, had the right to throw him out neck and crop—and I was strong enough

to do it—and he treated me as of no account. He did not even seem to be aware of me, but stood with his hands thrust negligently into his ragged pockets, and looked at Lisbeth's face, very white and lovely in that fairie light.

"And such a sweet good ghost!" he said almost to himself. And then with a laugh he bent and kissed her cheek.

It was done in an instant. Then he was off, running with a faun-like grace and speed over the grass towards the ruins—I in hot pursuit. But he was too swift for my heavier strength. Once he shouted back at me—a mocking not unfriendly shout—and I knew that he hadn't stayed to fight me because he guessed that this would tease me more. Then he was gone—so utterly that the earth might have swallowed him. I came back at last, panting and nearer tears than I would have cared to own. He had insulted Lisbeth, and I hadn't killed him. What was the use of defying dragons? He had kissed her, lightly and easily. And I.

Lisbeth was gone. I burst in upon old Hopejoy on the crest of what must have seemed a most unreasonable storm.

"Why—she's just walked on a little. You'll catch her up, Master Euan. She told me. I reckon I know the young good-for-nothing all right. I 'eared as 'ow 'e'd come back. His old aunt—Lizzy Smith—a real respectable body—keeps a sweetie shop in the High Street. Never no good he was. Always larking round like a young fox. ('Ow 'e got in I don't know.) Ran away when he was ten and been round the world they say. In some pretty places too, I'll warrant—prison, maybe."

"It's your business to keep such people out!" I said fiercely and banged the door in his face and ran for all I was worth. At the bottom of the hill Lisbeth waited for

me. I took her roughly by the arm. I was so shaken and miserable I hardly knew what I was doing.

"The beast—Oh Lisbeth, what a beast."

"It doesn't matter. He didn't touch the real me, did he? And somehow I don't think he meant to be horrid. I was just—just a ghost, as he said. Poor Euan!"

She slipped her hand into mine and we walked on in silence. It was quite dark now. Black clouds were rolling down from the plain and there was rain in the wind. We were both too sad and tired to talk. We loved one another and we had never been so far apart.

Such was my last, my longed-for day with her.

II

1

THREE years later—the War.

No one wants to hear about the War. I don't want to write about it. And yet I do not see how any one who belongs to this generation can tell his story truthfully and leave it out. Even if we didn't fight, it changed us. Perhaps, fundamentally, no one changes. But the War forced us all to our full development, for good or evil, weaknesses or strength. And one thing more it did. It cut us off from our successors and even from our own youth. We are very lonely. We speak our own language and are burdened with a knowledge which we can't pass on, however desperately we try. As we die out, the last of us—rich or poor, noble or ignoble, will exchange signs with one another like fellow-countrymen in a strange country.

So that though I want to pass over the War swiftly, I cannot pass over it altogether. Were I to do so the very people, who clamour, "No more of that," would scorn me in their hearts as the writer of a poor fairy-tale.

Individually, the War blew Stoneborough to the four winds. But Stoneborough itself never budged. In her impregnable serenity she represented England as the great cities never did. Five hundred men left her and never came back. The press howled desolation into her ears. She wept for the dead and was gravely concerned to hear that the living were making such a mess of things. But

in her neart she never doubted. For her conviction of ultimate triumph was not based on the Markets or the Stock Exchange or even on our armies (much less anyone else's army), but, whether she realized it or not, on the Cathedral, on her ancient winding streets, on the mysterious mounds and trenches, on the haunted plain above her—on the indestructible possession which these things stood for.

I was in my first year at Guy's. In two years' time I should be qualified and then I meant to ask Lisbeth to marry me. We were very happy. That brief inexplicable rift in our understanding was forgotten or never spoken of. It lay submerged beneath such glorious days together—at Oxford where she and my aunt and Miss Cornelious visited me in term time and at Stoneborough when I came home—that if I thought of it at all it was as of some feverish boyish imagining. I loved her, it seemed to me, more each day we met. I was proud of my love for her. I looked with arrogant, young contempt on the vapid or dissolute affairs of my friends. I don't remember thinking much of myself in other ways, but my love gave me a sort of splendour—a secret dignity. It kept me, passionate as I found myself to be, more chaste in thought and deed than a monk in his cell. To have turned for an instant to another woman would have been to destroy my one claim to Lisbeth, my one superiority over other men—that I loved her with all my heart and with all my body.

And Lisbeth? I knew her constancy. I knew there was no one dearer to her than I was. For all my pride I was very humble before her. It seemed to me enough.

And then the War.

On the 4th of August, Lisbeth and I picnicked together on the Plain. Seven days later I was in London and

wearing an ill-fitting uniform. I hardly remember what I felt or thought. My life, my very personality seemed to have been smashed into unrecognisable, incoherent fragments. My profession, chosen in a fit of boyish feeling, had absorbed me. Perhaps because I loved Lisbeth I loved people. I wanted to help them. And now, like thousands of my kind, I had to destroy, add torture and misery to the world. I had no choice. I set myself not to think—not to feel.

Ironically enough, I made a good soldier. I was very strong and numbed to an absolute obedience. After three months of intensive training they gave me two days' leave to say good-bye.

2

I spent the last evening in England with Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious. After supper I was to see Lisbeth just once again. So Aunt Geraldine had ruled. Going to the station on a damp cold night was pure mawkishness—at least, in people of her age. Lisbeth, being young and foolish, might think differently.

I don't remember what we talked about during that meal. All the time I was living on the other side of two walls where Lisbeth waited for me. I know my aunt was very gruff and matter of fact as though I had been going on a big-game shooting trip or something equally amusing and only incidentally dangerous.

"When you come back," she repeated constantly. I had had pneumonia as a child and she seemed to think my Colonel ought to be told, so that he could take adequate precautions. Miss Cornelious threatened to write, but I don't believe that they knew, either of them, what they were saying. I could see by their trembling hands that they were torn between a terrible fear for me and a

strange wonderful excitement. That sounds ghoulish. It was just pathetic. The nicest, kindest people in Stoneborough—all the world over—felt as they did. It was like being let out of a stifling prison—even if you were going to your execution.

I knew that all that evening Miss Cornelious was envying me and feeling herself to be an indecent, horrible old woman.

"Of course, when you come back," Aunt Geraldine said. She kissed me a grim, hard-featured farewell. She did not even leave her chair by the fire. (You could see that she was saying to herself, "What an unnecessary fuss!") But Miss Cornelious followed me to the door and stood looking out into the darkness and stroking my arm shyly.

"Euan dear, if you hear of anything—out there—that I could do—You'd let me know, wouldn't you?"

"Rather, Corny. Unless its something safe and cushy and then I'll have a shot at it myself."

"Of course, I'm old—I *seem* old. But I'm very strong, really. And I've nursed your aunt several times——" She must have suspected me of smiling to myself for she shook my arm fiercely. "It's too bad of you. I muddled up the medicines only once. Anyone might do that."

"I wasn't laughing. Only——"

"You see—I want to help."

"There'll be things to do here—you wait—more than enough."

She sighed.

"I suppose so. And of course—your aunt—she's not so strong as I am—I couldn't leave her."

"She'd die without you."

"Yes, I know. Euan, do you think Zeppelins might ever come this way?"

"Only if they lost themselves. There's nothing anyone would want to hit in Stoneborough."

She shook her head at me as though I had been lacking in respect.

"How can you say that! They'd love to damage the Cathedral. And there's the Territorial Headquarters." She let go my arm, murmuring, "Of course, I hope they don't—our poor people."

I kissed her and she clung to me like a child—like a child that has grown old but has never grown up. Everything was forgotten save that I might be going to my death.

"Dear Euan—we couldn't do without you."

I looked back at her as I reached the gate and saw her quaint shadow peering wistfully after me as though I had been all her stories which had come true and gone marching off with banners and trumpets, leaving her behind.

The gate clicked. I was in Lisbeth's garden. It rained—the chill melancholy rain of autumn whose footsteps I could hear rustling softly on the dead leaves beneath the trees. The privet hedge hid me like a high wall from the lights of the Close so that I seemed shut off in absolute solitude. It was one of those moments which hang in the memory like a picture. I can see myself and the low triangular house with its black, unlit windows. It might have been a deserted house and I my own ghost come back to the place which had once held all it loved. I seemed to waken suddenly from a long stupor. I realized with all my senses—for the first time—what was happening to me—that this was my life that was being offered up—my only life—and that I had never really lived. Everything that makes life glorious even in defeat and grief, lay before me and I was to turn away like a man dying of thrist from the promise of water. I felt that I

couldn't—that this was too much. Heart and body rose up in a shattering, panic-stricken revolt against the inhuman wrong of it. I cursed men and their cruelty. I wanted to smash with my fist their stupid, ruthless faces because of this thing that they were doing to me. I hated them with a hatred that was a kind of inverted terrible love.

In those moments too, I think, my boyhood died.

And then the door under the porch opened and light came out and flooded over me like a benediction. I saw her. As she took me by the hand and led me out of my bitter loneliness she seemed to me something more than human—the very spirit of pity and loving-kindness. I was not her lover then, but a lost child whom she had found and taken into her sanctuary.

We stood a moment in silence. All that I had come to say died in me. I felt broken and yet at peace like a man who has been saved at the last moment from death. She understood. She pressed my hand against her breast, comfortingly, as though she were trying to give me of her own warmth.

"I was listening for you."

We went together to her father's room. That too remains a picture—indelible and queerly violent for all its subdued colouring, its apparent peace. Colonel Gay sat in his invalid chair by the table. A large military map, dotted with flags, had been spread out under the lamp, and he was frowning down at it, his chin in his hand, so intent that he did not hear us. Then Lisbeth said, "Father, it's Euan come to say good-bye," and he glanced up at us.

Lisbeth was very like him. She had his small, resolute features, his colouring, and once he must have had her charm. Something of it still lingered in the light blue eyes that measured me. But his cheeks were sunken, the red-

dish hair had become grey, the mouth ironical. You could see that the gallant chivalrous spirit which he had given her had become in him a deformed, embittered captive.

"So you're off to the wars too, Sir Euan?"

I felt myself flushing up to the roots of my hair. I knew that for a moment he hated me—that the unfamiliar "Sir" was a gibe. Once "Sir Euan Fitzroy" must have sued a man grandly. It had a fine ringing sound to it like the jangle of steel. It made me, in my loutish, unwarlike uniform, a fool.

I tried to answer with the matter-of-fact cheerfulness that was our pose in these days.

"Yes, sir. Train goes in an hour. Crossing with my company to-morrow."

"Well, you'll have to hurry up, or the War will be over before you get there. We've got 'em on the run in spite of our damn-fool generals. Look here—not that I suppose you've been taught anything except how to keep your buttons shined."

He had gone back to his map. He made me follow him as he encircled the enemy swiftly. There was something vulture-like and pitiless in the way that the red flags swept on. He pushed his battalions, his regiments over hills and rivers. He withdrew them to be "refitted." He pushed up more regiments to take their place.

"In the first place we've got to reckon with fifty per cent casualties," he said carelessly and yet like a man who forgets nothing.

But to me those flags were men like myself.

Then in the very midst of it all—like the snap of steel that is flawed at the heart—he crashed his fist down on the table, and the flags shot up in the air and were scattered with a kind of mimic horribleness.

"The fools—the damned fools—my God—and I lived for this."

Lisbeth made a movement as though she would have put her arms about him, but he flung her off, growling in his throat like a desperately wounded animal.

"For God's sake—leave me alone—both of you—leave me alone."

We stood helpless. So that was his part in the agony, strange, incredible part it seemed—terribly hard. He was near break down. He couldn't face us but sat with his head bent, drumming on the table with his tortured fingers. I saw Lisbeth's eyes resting on him and their understanding wrung my heart, for it seemed to put me outside her life. I might be killed—hideously maimed, and she would not pity me as she pitied him. She saw a man's life as he had taught her to see it—a soldier's vision. Men fought. That was their glory. Killing, you understand, did not come into it. Just fighting. And he was fettered, scenting the far-off battle, frustrated of his man's right, maimed, impotent.

She motioned to me and I followed her back into the hall. Her soft, low voice sounded quite steady. She was so young, but it was not for her to break down. Everything depended on her. Even then—and this was the oddest, saddest contradiction in it all—she was mother to everything that suffered.

"You see—he'd always known it would come—worked for it—tried to get himself and everyone under him ready. And to-day we heard—his regiment went into action and was cut to pieces because of some mistake. Oh, Euan, it's cruel."

We stood close to one another. The light from the lamp that hung from one immense black beam seemed to me only the reflection of herself—of that shining beloved

head. She was all warmth and life—and I was numb and frozen in my misery. I had meant to tell her a hundred things. It all seemed useless now. She did not love me—she was not thinking of men.

Then our eyes met. And as though it were the simplest, the most inevitable thing in the world, she put up her hands to my face and drew me down to her and kissed me.

"Oh, Euan, God take care of you!"

We clung to one another. I think on the highest plane of passion there are no men and women—only human beings—and that love, driven to the verge of supreme happiness or supreme despair, is sexless. Passion we both felt. It knitted us together, fused us so that for one moment I knew a peace which made my whole life, even if it ended here in seeming frustration, gloriously worth living. I kissed her then—as I had dreamed of kissing her. I felt her mouth on mine—touch my eyes, my forehead in a kind of blessing. But my senses were quiet, demanding nothing, keyed to an absolute renouncement.

"It will be over soon—in a few weeks. Father says it can't go on."

"Of course not. You mustn't worry. I'll be back almost before you know I've gone."

"I'll write—every day—and send you things."

"No—no—just write—so that I know. Give me something—your handkerchief—I'll wear it in my cap like one of those old Knights."

We tried to laugh. But our cheeks were wet. She was aching for me. And yet I had to go. And I knew that I was going because in her eyes there was no question—no choice. Reason—even duty—let alone my temper, should have kept me to my profession—but I had flung everything to the winds because this was the only way she knew.

"Don't come to the station—I couldn't bear it."

"I couldn't either."

"Good-bye, Euan."

"Good-bye, Lisbeth."

But one day it would all come right. Surely—surely if one loved like this.

I remember as a kind of anti-climax, passing Lizzie Smith's sweet-shop in the High Street on the way to the station. The lights were out. The rain had driven the loungers indoors. I could see a smudgy line of ancient dusty sweets under the edge of the drawn blind. And in the midst of my sick grief the thought of that scare-crow, triumphant figure in conjunction with this frowsy respectable litle shop made me laugh to myself.

I wondered where John Smith was now.

"Why, in gaol probably," I thought.

And did not think of him again for four whole years.

III

1

THEN four years later I ran into him—or rather was held up by him, since he seemed to occupy the whole of Stoneborough's market-place. We were in the thick of our Victory elections and getting accustomed to crowds, but this crowd was a mob, restless and fretful tempered. My shattered left arm made a struggle painful and Lisbeth and I would have turned back, but the people behind were in no mood to give way, even though we all knew each other—were friends as people are friends in a little town.

The fact was, we had all changed—not fundamentally but for a good way below the surface. Our nice, placid, comfortably off people had become bitterly poor and were up against difficulties for which nothing in their lives had prepared them. Our poor had money which was only an irritant because less than ever could anyone buy happiness. As to the men who had been fighting they were just ill—and too inarticulate to explain how ill. The demand upon their stoicism was gone. They were let down—discouraged, angry with everyone, but chiefly with themselves. They knew they ought to be thankful that they were alive. They weren't. They did not know what they wanted—or even if they wanted anything at all. All they knew was that *this* was not what they had been prepared to die for.

It was a generation since Stoneborough had had an election, for no one had ever dared challenge our Con-

servatism. But now after four years' killing, we had decided that all we really wanted was the Kaiser's head. It was a makeshift, childish want, significant of our exhaustion, and our member, an obstinate old gentleman who had no more idea of humouring us than of retiring, said so. At once two other candidates appeared in the lists, a labour man hoping to profit by a split vote, and Sir Felix Gordon professing a robust and English independence. Our sober Stoneborough wore their three flamboyant colours like the symptoms of a disease.

I have not mentioned Felix Gordon before, because though he played such a violent part in our lives, he seems to be even now not so much an individual as a type—not so much as a man as a submerged element in human nature thrown up by the volcanic convulsion of the War. He declared himself a native of Stoneborough, and I believe it to be true that he was the son of an ironmonger in the High Street who had gone bankrupt and disappeared. But what he had done in his youth nobody knew or cared. However, we all knew what he had done in the War. His posters told us. Something in connection with Central America, where he appeared to have considerable interests and influence, munitions, recruiting—all rather large and vague. At any rate, there he was—large and not at all vague, substantially knighted, wealthy, and with a passionate enthusiasm for what he called "his town." No carpet-bagger either. He had taken Abbey Lodge, the biggest house outside the Close, and it was discreetly understood that once inside the House and beyond the reach of the Bribery and Corruption Act, he meant to return good-will for good-will.

He canvassed Aunt Geraldine in person which showed a sort of astuteness in the man. Somehow he must have known that though Miss Cornelious (whose books didn't

sell much now) opened the door to him herself and Aunt Geraldine might have been seen scurrying in the direction of our nearest cake-shop for supplies for the tea to which he was hospitably invited, these two shabby old ladies did count. I can see him now, seated by the fire, well-dressed, heavily built, with a bull-dog face that was near enough to a bluff honesty for popular purposes. His little bright eyes that could look innocent and kindly rested on us in turn.

"Don't you think that because I'm one of the new-made crowd, that I don't understand," he said. "I'm not a fool. I'm on your side. In a couple of generations or so my children may be like you. I want them to be. That's one of the reasons I mean to keep your sort on top. I know how the War hits you. There are people who want to crush you out of existence. They can do it financially—well, money's a thing I understand. I know where money is and how to get it. I mean to get Stoneborough folk on their feet." He brooded a moment. Then it was my turn: "Pretty rough on the men too, Sir Euan. Four vital years of their careers gone. Got to go back to school with a lot of young cubs who were playing naughts and crosses when they were in the trenches. Brain rusty. Exhausted. Take them two years to get back to the normal. Got to have a square deal."

I hated and distrusted the man, but in that moment my heart warmed towards him. He did not mention my useless arm, which was clever. There was no hint of sympathy in his voice. Just a plain statement of my own case. He knew what no one seemed to understand—that the physical hurt was nothing.

He was an undisguised demagogue. He had his feet on both pedals and his hands on all the loud stops of popular feeling. He demanded the Kaiser's head more vocifer-

ously than any of us. He meant to have it. He practically promised it us, if—And the odd part of it all was that respectable, cautious, middle-class Stoneborough liked him.

"Of course—not a gentleman," Aunt Geraldine admitted—"but so energetic—and we're all so tired. He'll look after our interests. I'm sure of that. He said so."

"He must have a strange, wonderful life," murmured Miss Cornelious, looking wistful as though she were thinking of these lost pirates of hers.

By this time we had edged our way forward so that we could see the placards on the cart from which the speaker was addressing his audience and even catch his voice above the shuffling of feet and running fire of interruptions. Lisbeth had gone a little ahead, on my left side, so that no one could push against me and hurt me (there was something touchingly, fiercely chivalrous about her small upright figure). Now she glanced back, flushed and eager.

"Who is it, Euan? Isn't it someone we know?"

I shook my head. I hardly knew what she had asked. I was wishing hard that I could feel properly again. She was, I knew, so lovely. Those few years had developed, not changed her. More than ever she seemed to me a woman-child out of a dream and I felt with a faint sinking of the heart that the dearest thing in her—that almost mystic charm as though she had only just reached the borderland of this world—had protected her somehow from the blows that had stunned the life in me.

"It's that Smith chap," a man next me said. "One of the Gordon gang."

Lisbeth laughed.

"Which Smith?" she asked.

The man glanced at her sullenly as though he resented her light-heartedness. I knew him. Hopejoy's son. He had worked up at Old Stoneborough in various capacities

from gardener's boy upward and we had often gone ferreting together on the sly. Now for his own reasons he did not want to recognise me.

"Never 'eard of Smith? No, I suppose not. In a couple of years nobody'll 'ave 'eard of any of us. Well, 'e was in the Flying Corps once."

I had a stir of real interest—a sort of thrill which hurt like the coming to life of a frozen limb.

"Smith's Squadron?"

"That's 'im."

"Shouldn't have thought he would have backed a windbag like Gordon?"

"Oh, wouldn't you? Why not? Got guts, both of 'em. Know wot we want."

His eyes slid over me, avoiding mine, and came to rest on my useless arm with a faint ugly smile. And I read his thought. "You! Wot's a smashed arm to *you* with all your blasted money? Let you go through life swaggering as a damned fine fellow. Comrades of the Great War! We aren't comrades now, curse the lot of you!" Queer things can happen and in that moment I understood what was wrong with us and why I wasn't either proud or happy.

"I'd like just to see him," Lisbeth said.

And then, typically enough, the sullen young man made way for us. We seemed to go forward with a rush as though a barrier had gone down and there was the speaker standing in front of us—high upon his improvised platform—laughing——

Well, I have said before that it was his fate always to be dramatic. Everything that he did had in it an element of vividness—almost of violence. I knew at once that I had never really forgotten him. He had been at the back of my mind, like a patch of startling colour. I wasn't even

surprised. He was bound to turn up again in some fashion or other. It was almost as though he had warned me.

So this was Flight Commander John Smith, V. C., D. S. O., heaven knew what else, who had baffled and finally smashed the great von Eichen with his notorious squadron.

He hadn't changed much. He had kept his slenderness, his faun-like, deceptive air of fragility. His clothes were shabby as ever and worn with the same gorgeous carelessness that made them the proper and seemly dress of a man. The soft hat had been thrown on the seat behind him and the winter sun drew out a smothered fire from the thick brown hair that he wore brushed back close to the head. Evidently, someone in the crowd had challenged him. He was in the thick of the fight and the whole poise of his body suggested a clever fencer, alert and supple, husbanding his energy. But his eyes had the look which I remembered with a queer clutch at the heart. I couldn't have told why it should seem to me faintly tragic, for it was daring and remorseless and assured, as though he knew that the distant thing for which he waited was coming to him, all sails stretched.

"I'll answer that question first," he said. "Yes, I believe in a League of Nations—of English-speaking nations. Because they're the only nations fit to govern. But if you ask me if I want to be tied up in everlasting brotherhood with a lot of half-tamed monkeys—no—I say from my heart no—I tell you I've seen them—and what's more I've smelt them and they're no bedfellows for my sort or your sort. And what's more again, they don't want to be our bedfellows. They don't like our smell either. They couldn't rest till they'd either kicked us out or got us down into their own filth with them. It's a fight between us

and we're hypocrites and traitors if we don't face up to it."

There was cheering. They liked his roughness—coming from a man who had faced roughness without flinching. Perhaps they liked to feel that here was someone with so much fight left in him. His eyes dropped, rested on me by accident, came back from whatever they had been watching and seemed literally to pounce as a hawk pounces. He recognised me. But I was only a clue. He passed me in a flash. Then his whole face changed, softened with a queer look of gaiety, of triumph, half ironical, half caressing. It was as though someone he wanted had tried to escape him and failed and that he was amused and touched by such a futile, pathetic effort. Involuntarily, I turned to Lisbeth too. I felt I had to stand between her and the audacious intimacy of that stare. It was absurd that my boy's anger should flare up again. But Lisbeth had forgotten me. She stood there, intent and still, with that withdrawn look which was so troubling, as though her heart had gently escaped out of one's hands. The colour had gone from her cheeks. She was so white that I spoke urgently, in a sort of panic.

"What is it, dear? Is it the crowd? Shall we get out of this?"

"No. I'm quite all right."

"Do you recognise him?"

She nodded. I forced myself to feel careless.

"Queer—that young blighter becoming John Smith."

She did turn to me then. It was not a lack of humour that made her say gravely, wisely:

"He always was John Smith."

"I suppose so." I laughed. "I suppose he was right. The helmet fitted."

He had begun to speak again, his hands thrust into his

sagging pockets, his head up. He was not looking at us now, but there was an illusive smile about the clean-shaven mouth that had nothing to do with what he was saying. It made me think of a cat that turns away from its victim for a moment of pretended indifference.

"The last interrupter taunts my man with being an adventurer. This is my last answer. He is an adventurer. That's why I'm backing him. *I'm* an adventurer. I've done nothing else but adventure all my life. Rot in your vegetable patches if you're vegetables, but if you're living men come out and live like men. Adventurer! As though that were an insult—Why what the hell is life but an adventure?"

It was not the kind of stuff that one would have expected to appeal to sedate, peaceful Stoneborough after four years of war, but there was something famished in the cheer that greeted his demand. I saw the sullen cloud lift from the faces of the men and the women too had stirred uneasily as though they were thinking, What's our adventure?

"You think you want peace, that you're sick of war. You're not. You're sick of peace already. Sick of having to go back to the old drudgery, that's so damnably safe and profitless. You want to risk yourselves—for something worth while—with a fighting chance. Fighting, in one shape or another, is a natural state and you're natural men. Gordon is a fighter and so am I. We started nowhere and we're coming out on top. You can come with us—or stay where you are——"

He made a sweeping gesture. The crowd fell back from the cart and he jumped down, leaving his hat behind and a pale-faced companion to whom the desertion seemed disconcertingly unexpected. It was such a young, spontaneous movement, but yet not young at all. Even that

masquerading seven years before—hadn't been really boyish.

He came straight for me, so purposefully that there was nothing for it but to hold my ground. His expression, his whole bearing were that of capturing an old friend, and I had either to carry off a stupid stockish pretence of not remembering or laughing back at him. Well, I laughed. He made me. When he chose he was like a tidal wave.

"Why, where's she gone?" he asked.

For Lisbeth had vanished—slipped from my side into the crowd without a word. My disconcerted face seemed to amuse him hugely. "Isn't it stupid—not even knowing her name?" he said.

"I don't see any reason why you should," I retorted stiffly. But then I gave it up. I surrendered, as it were, to the fact of our queer relationship—to a sort of inevitability that was like fate. "You've got a good memory for faces anyway," I added.

"So have you. A regular pugnacious memory. You're as mad with me as you were seven years ago. Let's go and have it out. There's a quiet spot by the river. I owe it you." Then he saw my arm. "Oh, well, I'll let you punch my head. I expect you'd do some damage. Damnably strong. Anyone can see that. That's why I ran away."

"Oh no, it isn't," I said. "You ran away because you knew it would make me madder than anything else."

He turned a quick look of appreciation on me.

"There's something in that, of course. I did want to annoy you. You'd annoyed me."

"I'd like to know why."

"Well—butting in like that."

"It seems to me that you did the butting," I retorted grimly. "The place might have belonged to you."

"That's what I thought." He took me by the arm and steered me resolutely out of the crowd. "It may seem unreasonable to you, but the fact is, you intruded. Tell me, is she awfully wild with me?"

He talked as though it had all happened yesterday.

"If you mean Miss Gay—why should she be?"

"Miss Gay. Thanks. Why for kissing her at once like that."

"You were a young cad," I said. "But I don't suppose she remembers it at all."

"Oh yes, she does. And she doesn't think I'm a young cad either. She never did. She knew better. It was the only thing I could have done. But you were in love with her. I suppose you are still."

It was outrageous. But his outrageousness was disarming. Not that it was spontaneous. It was deliberate. It was as though he had said, 'Now I am going to put all my cards down on the table,' with an amused eye on me to see if I had enough metal in me to play up to him. I answered 'Yes' and had a sudden sense of quiet and security.

"You couldn't help it," he reflected. "There are women and women, you know. She's the fatal sort. Trailing clouds of glory or something. She knows all about God."

I was staggered.

"And what do you know about God?" I demanded, ironically.

"Not so much as she does. But a lot more than you do, my renegade, prick-eared Puritan. You see, I'm a Catholic."

"A Roman Catholic."

"A Catholic," he retorted. "None of your damned

Reformation distinctions." He was arrogantly serious —so much so that he swept the subject out of my reach.

"Is she going to marry you?" he demanded.

"I haven't asked her."

"No, you wouldn't. You wouldn't think it fair. The war and all that. Well, you can now."

"Look here," I said with belated heat, "I don't mind you talking about my affairs—though Heaven knows why I don't—but you can leave Lisbeth out of it."

"Ah—Lisbeth—Lisbeth Gay—that's so like her. I was afraid she might be a Mabel or something utterly wrong like that. What's the use of getting angry all over again? I've never loved anyone else except Lisbeth. It's natural that I should take an interest."

"You're mad," I said.

"Of course, you've got the pull over me. You've known her all your life. You could marry her to-morrow. On the other hand, I brought down ten brace of Germans for her sake—at least in part—I had my own neck to think of too. But I went after the V. C. deliberately."

"If you imagine that twenty dead Germans make a tribute likely to please Lisbeth Gay——" I interrupted.

"It would please any woman."

"Not a modern woman."

"Well. Lisbeth isn't modern."

We had come to the grey stone gateway that led into the Close and I stopped, determined to cut short this impossible conversation. I believe at the bottom of my heart was the conviction that if he saw Lisbeth's home he would recognise it. We faced one another. I met his strange, blue eyes, so apparently expressive and revealing, with a scowling steadiness. It was the only way by which I could resist the crazy charm of the fellow.

"You know, you're not being frank because you *are*

frank," I said acutely. "You're only saying all this because you know it knocks one speechless. Social intercourse is organised only to deal with liars. You're like a man walking up and down the High Street with a revolver —one simply can't protect oneself."

He laughed.

"There's a lot of truth in that too. But I'm in a hurry. I want to get our friendship on a clean footing."

"Friendship?"

"Well, we might be friends. We've got to be something to one another. That's clear. I liked the look of you that first time in spite of the fact that you had annoyed me."

"I don't even know who you are——" I interrupted helplessly.

"Commander John Smith, V.C., D.S.O., M.C.," he returned and for the life of me I could not tell whether his gravity was real or humorously assumed. "At present, electioneering Agent to Sir Felix Gordon."

"That seems a queer job for Commander John Smith, V.C., D.S.O., M.C., to take up—backing a shady financier."

"He's not shady. There are no shades about him whatever. And he's offered me a thumping big job on his place in Quetzelango if I pull this off."

"So that's it."

"Of course. John Smith has got to live."

"Why?"

"Because he damn well means to."

There was no answer that I could think of. He measured me coolly.

"By the way—what are you, Fitzroy?"

"Nothing."

"Isnt that rather a queer job for a Fitzroy to take up?"

"*Touche,* Commander."

But he had not made me flinch and he smiled with the good humour of a boxer who has missed his mark.

"I believe you're a damn fine fellow all the same. I shall always like you, even if I have to murder you. I suppose you won't introduce us properly?"

"I will not."

"It doesn't make a ha-porth of difference. I've got to go back now and rescue that poor pipsqueak from the lions. I had to have it out with you. See you later."

And then, incredibly, we shook hands.

2

I did not try to find Lisbeth. I was shy of her in those days and shyer now than ever, and desperately tired. It was the kind of weariness that had got past the point where it is possible to rest. For four years I had learnt to disregard exhaustion—to go on and on relentlessly—and now I didn't know any more how to stop. Perhaps, too, I was frightened of stopping and facing up to what had happened to me.

So I climbed the hill which rises like a cliff out of the sea to the Plains and in the early afternoon, already bordering on a winter's dusk, I found myself talking to old Hopejoy at his turnstile. Hopejoy was like the grey building he watched over. He did not seem to grow any older, it did not seem possible that he had ever been young. And yet he had changed. It was in his manner—a furtive brooding as though there were something secreted in his mind which he meant to keep hidden.

He told me about his grandson who had been out in the War from the beginning.

"Yes, Sir Euan, 'e was lucky. Not a scratch. But they are'nt given 'im 'is job back and 'is girl's chucked 'im, and now 'e's drinking 'is head off. You don't get no pension for that."

"We'll have to see what can be done for him," I said. Hopejoy lifted a heavy veiled look to my face.

"It ain't charity 'e wants, Sir Euan, 'e says 'e wants 'is rights."

"And what are they?"

He sank back into himself.

"I don't say I know. It's wot we 'aven't got."

Queer talk from old Hopejoy. We had been friends. We weren't friends any more. Perhaps if I made some effort I might unearth the trouble, but that was just what I couldn't do. I was forced back on a mechanical platitude.

"You've got hipped, sitting up here alone. I don't suppose a soul ever came near the place—did they?"

"No, sir. Just Miss Lisbeth would come. No one else. I used to think I'd been forgotten. I might 'ave been a sort of ghost myself, prowling about them empty rooms."

"Well, it will be different now. You'll have your tourists to liven things up."

He took my shilling and pushed my ticket across the sill to me.

"You won't have forgotten your way about, Sir."

It was as though he had slammed a door in my face. I would have turned back, but I did not want him to see that I guessed or cared that he had broken his old ties. It was all part of the general ugliness of things.

I crossed the lawn that lies like a green pool amidst the ruins. It had been famous once. But the present owners had had no intention of spending money on an unprofitable investment. Now the grass was coarse and unkempt, with weeds everywhere. The last bedraggled peacock stood

like an effigy to decay in a fading patch of sunlight and watched me pass as though I too had been a shadow.

Lisbeth had come here. The place was haunted by her —I seemed to see her playing in and out of the twilight with the clumsy thick-set boy, who had been myself, tagging at her heels, bewitched by the golden loveliness of her. She hadn't changed. But I was cold and dead as the stones against which I leant, looking down over the river and the misty distance of plain.

My name was spoken. I turned with a leap of the heart as though I had been dreading someone. The big stout man at my elbow must have come upon me with a cat-like lightness or I must have been deeper in my thoughts than I knew. He carried his soft hat balancing in his hands behind him and the faintest wind stirred the crisp grey hair and gave him a jovial honest look.

He nodded to me.

"Sorry if I startled you, Sir Euan."

"I didn't know there was anyone in the place except myself," I answered. "Hopejoy didn't tell me."

"He'd probably forgotten. I've been prowling round for the last two hours. I had to get away from that hubbub. This does a man good."

"And the election?" I asked.

"Oh, that can look after itself for a bit."

"You feel pretty safe?"

"No one's safe till he's dead. But I'd back myself at 4 to 1."

"You've got two good men against you."

"They'll cancel one another out. One of 'em is ten years too old and the other's ten years too young. I'm the man for to-day, Sir Euan. I want what the mass wants."

"What's that?"

"Well, someone hung for all this mess. And plenty of

money, and a thundering good time. It's owing us. Damn it all, what did we win the War for?"

I looked at him curiously. I felt sure that he had never suffered in his life. He had always eaten and drunk a little too much, but he was so strong that it had not hurt him. Perhaps it was the queer half-light in which we stood that made him seem suddenly monstrous. Not monstrously evil—but monstrously stupid. He was like a huge impersonal symbol of the brutish folly in men.

"Of course that fellow Smith is a trump card," Gordon went on ruminatingly. "A stroke of luck for us both, our coming together. You've seen him, I expect? A queer chap. But he's got the goods all right. That V.C. of his is worth a couple of thousand votes at least."

I did not answer and I could feel his small bright eyes dart at me. "I expect you feel I'm intruding here, Sir Euan?" he asked abruptly.

I laughed.

"I don't in the least. Besides nobody can intrude now."

"You mean — because I've paid my shilling I've a right?" He shook his square head. "I'm not such a fool as that. I can guess what you feel. Must make you sick to have an upstart fellow like me buying his way into your place."

He was subtly mistaken. I could not and would not have tried to explain to him that Old Stoneborough and I had parted company like two people who belong to one another by blood; no one could come between us.

"Of course, the whole business is queer to me," he went on, "having ancestors and all this behind you. But I know I wouldn't rest until I'd got it back and slammed the door in the faces of people like myself." He laughed good humouredly. "You see, I'm a down-right, practical fellow, but I've got a spot of imagination somewhere."

Then he seemed to me slightly pathetic too.

"I think the present owners want £40,000 for it," I said. "It might suit you. After all, you'll be somebody's ancestor in time."

"Maybe. I don't care much for myself. And I'd feel a fool in a place like this. I tell you straight, there's only one person I'd like to see here and that's yourself, Sir Euan." He looked at me straight with that air of bold, bluff sincerity which was somewhere not convincing. And yet I guessed that the man's power lay in his own belief that he was honest. "Perhaps you think it's an impertinence—my saying that?" he asked.

"Not a bit. It's very nice of you. But since I haven't got £40,000 and am not likely to have."

"Money's scarce," he interrupted. "But there's a lot of it somewhere if one knew where."

"Well. I don't."

"And I do." I knew now that this conversation had not been idle and that we were heading straight for its point. "In the New World, for instance. That's where I belong. I've got property out there that when it's developed will make £20,000 look like a flea's bite. And I'm going to let my friends in." He waited a moment. "Look here. May I spak to you in confidence?"

"If you want to."

"You're a man of honour. What I'm going to say might be misunderstood. I ought, from the legal point of view, to hold my tongue. It might look to other people as though I were trying to bribe you. But you know I can't and I know you know, so that's square between us. If you want to buy your old home back, Sir Euan, I can make it possible."

There it was. I pulled myself out of my lounging attitude to face him.

"I don't want to buy Old Stoneborough," I said. "And I don't want £20,000. My present job is to get rid of what I've got. Still I like your spirit. I suppose it makes no difference that I'm going to work and vote against you?"

His small eyes became round and almost wistfully astonished.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, why?"

"That'd make too long a story. Partly because I guess you're a self-seeking scoundrel and partly because of the things you'll make us want. Anyhow—does your offer stand?"

"It does not," he returned simply.

"Well, that's straight."

"If you blab——"

"I shouldn't dream of it. You were perfectly justified in trusting me."

He took a deep breath.

"You're as mad as a hatter. But I believe you're straight. You'd better keep out of all this. If anybody butts into me there's going to be a lot of rough-housing."

"Well, I've had four years of rough-housing," I said. "It will be like old times."

He turned his back on me. He was absurdly like a large peevish child, nursing an injury. I raised my hat.

"I ought to warn you that Hopejoy locks up at dusk regardless of stragglers. It's a peculiarity of his. And it's a beastly place to spend a night in."

He did not answer.

As I passed him Hopejoy peered out from his warren. And something of his old friendliness seemed to peer out too, half shy, half sullen.

"What do you make of him, Master Euan?"

"A jolly old pirate," I answered.

The dim withered face became veiled again.

"'E knows what we wants."

"So he says."

"Well, it's different for the likes of you, Sir."

A queer, dead rage made me fly out at him.

"And what do you know about that? You damned, faithless old fool?"

I left him gaping there. I felt sure that he shuffled out to stare after me—that he was even making up his mind to follow me and that if he did so we should both of us cry in a tired, aimless sort of way. In my fear of him I almost ran.

3

That night when I went into the Gays' house to find Lisbeth I found John Smith.

They had forgotten to turn the light on. He sat opposite Lisbeth on the arm of Colonel Gay's chair, negligent and yet alert, watching her. She was not looking at him, I thought—but gazed into the fire, with her face between her hands, in her favourite attitude, her red-gold hair shining, very still, like a quiet steady burning flame.

Colonel Gay, huddled back in the shadow, was just a handful of grey ash between them.

John Smith nodded to me casually. It was as though we had known each other so long and so well that there was no need for ceremony.

"I was telling them about that Revolution Gordon set going in Quetzelango in 1912," he said. "I don't suppose you remember it. But I happened to be in it myself in a small way." He added gently with his eyes on Lisbeth, "That was the year after we met, you know."

"I didn't know you ever had met," Colonel Gay muttered fretfully. "Nobody tells me anything now."

He was like a sick child, passing in a moment from tears to fierce, blasting rages. During the War there had been periods of definite madness, as when he had tried to take command of the troops on Stoneborough Plain and had been pityingly humoured by his brother-officers. Then he had given himself to the invention of a gun which could blow an army to pieces at fifty miles range. The workshop at the top of the house where he dragged himself painfully, day after day, was littered with plans and odd "parts" made by the local smith. But there was no money and the War Office turned a deaf ear.

That had been the whole meaning of the War for Lisbeth. The comfortably convalescent and cheerful wounded who came her way, the clean white bandages which she rolled in the depot left her father a towering figure of supreme tragedy.

"It was such a little meeting," John Smith murmured. "But I don't think any of us forgot it."

He fell silent and Colonel Gay drummed on his knees with his stiff-jointed fingers.

"Well—I don't want to hear about that. Get on—get on. What happened?"

"It was a quick business. All the Quetzelango Presidents had been devils, but the Marenno had been a devil too long. The people wanted a change. Gordon put up Alvarez, bought the army for him, all except a handful who had got in their noddles that Marenno would be too much for them; the rest was easy. There was a bit of a dust up in Quetzelango City, but we soon wiped that up and Marenno and his band, who knew they wouldn't get any better terms than a firing squad, faded in the hills. Well, we left them there. There aren't any roads worth

speaking of in Quetzelango and it would have been a long business ferreting them out. They weren't worth it. They may be there now. More likely they're dead. Anyhow, Alvarez was a grateful fellow. He made Gordon British Consul for Quetzelango and gave him twenty square miles of Coffee Finca that had belonged to Marenno. There's an unworked gold vein running through it. Alvarez didn't know that, but Gordon did. He was on the point of opening it up when the War broke out. Alvarez wanted to go German—the Germans are thick as fleas out there—but Gordon pointed out to him that what had happened before might happen again and he changed his mind. I dare say the mind of a potty little Central American Government doesn't seem very important to you over here, but it meant a lot to the British traders on the spot."

Colonel Gay threw back his head with a thin exultant laugh.

"That was well done. I like that fellow Gordon. I liked him when he came here. He understood about my gun at once. He said he'd put it before the House. I'll vote for him. You too, Euan. Your name carries a lot of weight still. You could do something."

John Smith lifted his eyebrows at me in quizzical understanding. In spite of being what I was, an undecorated Captain, a prospective general practitioner, maimed and five years too late in his career, I still retained a shadow of old glory. My name might be too big for me, but it was still mine.

"Fitzroy could help a lot with the dug-outs," Smith said. "They're afraid of anything new and unlabelled, and he could give them a lead."

"That's what I shan't do. I told Gordon this afternoon I was against him."

Colonel Gay shot round violently in his chair to look at me. I knew that he had hated me obscurely since that night at the outbreak of the War, but the hatred had shown itself only in a chilling disparagement. Now it threatened me.

"Might I ask why?"

The "why" banded Lisbeth against me too. She still would not look at any of us, but now she was sitting stiffly upright, with her white hands clasped tensely on the arms of her chair, as though she were trying to withdraw herself from the reach of some fierce relentless encroachment. I saw how lovely she was, how desirable, and knew I loved her. But my love was like a prisoner shut away in a nethermost dungeon, beyond hearing, walled down under a frightful indifference. I knew I was wretched and suffering, but I couldn't feel any pain. I couldn't care.

"Well, Sir?"

It didn't matter either what I said.

"Gordon asked me the same question. I told him that he was a self-seeking scoundrel."

"That comes near libel, Fitzroy."

"Gordon won't prosecute me," I retorted. "Or do you think he will, Commander? You're his representative. You ought to know."

I can feel now the charm of his answering smile, at once so frank and so baffling.

"He won't. It's too easy to prove that a man like Gordon is a scoundrel. Every man who has courage and audacity is somebody's villain. As to self-seeking—we're all tarred with the same brush. You too. You mean to be a doctor. I daresay you think it's a damn humane profession. But it's eaten up with the beastliest sort of greed. I believe if Jesus Christ—" (he crossed himself

with an amazing change of expression, as though his mind had flashed in and out of a Holy of Holies) "had to choose between one of your precious necromancers making fat money out of sick frightened people and a frank adventurer like Gordon who fights other adventurers on equal terms, he'd choose Gordon. And so would I. And I'd rather be a pirate on the High Seas than either of them."

His eyes sparkled, perhaps with laughter, I did not try to answer him. What did it matter what any of them thought?

But Lisbeth spoke. She had been trying all along not to meet his eyes, but now she looked at him straightly.

"Euan isn't like that. He isn't self-seeking. He doesn't care about anything except people."

I laughed.

"You're making it worse for me, Lisbeth," I said.

I saw Colonel Gay's malevolent little smile.

"Sir Euan is kind. I am sure he was kind even to the Germans. I daresay he broke his arm trying to save one of them."

"That happens to be true," I admitted with the same cold amusement.

"And yet," John Smith said, "he wanted to knock my head off and I was so sure he would that I ran away. I believe I'd run away again. It's my experience that kind, gentle people can be damn dangerous."

He was not thinking of me at all. He was thinking of Lisbeth and looking at her with a new attentiveness. His quick ear had caught the sound of steel in her voice. He knew now what I had always known, that beneath all that elusive other-worldliness and caressing softness of look and voice, there was that frightening strength. It

did not daunt him. He wanted her more implacably than ever. But he was measuring himself against her.

"Oh, in a way Fitzroy's all right," he said. "This sort of thing is rotten. I wouldn't be in it if there were a decent war going on anywhere in the world. But there isn't and I've got to take what I can get. Fighting is the only honest career."

"Sometimes it cuts short a career," Colonel Gay muttered.

John Smith spoke with a high, amazing gravity.

"Do you think a career can be cut short by anyone but God?"

It was strange what an effect that answer had upon me. As though it had been the note of a magic gong, I found myself in the vast bejewelled darkness of a great French Cathedral where I had been once as a boy. I saw lights and the slow rising clouds of incense. I heard the murmur of an unceasing prayer. The vision—if such it was—lasted less than a second. Then I was back among surroundings that had become unreal. Something large and magnificent endured. This man. I felt myself complicated, tortuous, and dark beside his bold simplicity. And yet, meeting his eyes, I felt too that he was an enigma, at least to me, because I had ceased to be simple. And Lisbeth? She looked at him too, disarmed, bewitched. I remembered what he had said. "But Lisbeth isn't modern."

He went on quietly as though he were not conscious of any change in us.

"So when this is all over I'll get back to Quetzelango. Anything might happen there. Central America is about the only part of the globe where a white man can build with a free hand. Or China. One could do strange things there. A new Empire—a world-Empire. Who

can tell when the man will come? China waits for him like a great cask of gunpowder."

His subdued exultancy stung me out of my indifference.

"We'll have to see to it that he never comes," I said.

He shook his head at me.

"You can't stop him—any more than you can stop the rising of the sun."

"He would be a common enemy."

"Well, that would be someone for us to fight."

"God knows—" I said, stammering with a sense of helpless weariness, "we've had enough of that."

He laughed, his head a little on one side, mocking and kindly, "I believe Fitzroy is thinking of the Brotherhood of Man and the League of Nations. Well—one could always be a Pirate. You know I met a pirate once. Talking of China reminded me."

We did not speak. There was reminiscence in his voice, brooding and warm, and presently he went on to tell us of an adventure he had had as a boy. It seemed that he had worked for a few months on a trading-steamer that plied between ports on some Chinese river. He did not waste words on much description, but I knew that there crept into that grave Elizabethan room an alien perfume, acrid, intoxicating—the whole atmosphere of another civilization. The shadowy walls melted into great flat distances through whose pale colours the wide river wound like a slow-moving implacable serpent. We saw the ramshackle steamer chugging against the stream, the sudden, deadly flash—out from a hidden creek of a junk manned by a hundred oars, the shrieking, fumbling efforts of a half-breed panic-stricken crew, the swift overhauling and boarding of their wretched vessel by a pitiless silent horde of slit-eyed men, led by a woman.

His voice caressed her. She had been beautiful according to an Oriental standard. At least, she had been terrible. The decks were slippery with the blood of that massacre. They had their knives to his own throat when she saw him. Perhaps she had never seen a fair-skinned blue-eyed English boy before. He did not whine or scream as the others had done—we knew that—and she stared at him awhile, gave an order, and he was carried away into her captivity. For three months he belonged to her. He passed over these months lightly. She had been cruel, but not to him, this strange woman-pirate. And then hearing by chance that he was within reasonable distance of a Christian Mission, he had escaped.

"I travelled fifty miles in twenty hours over strange country, without food. I was flying for my life. If she had caught me she would have cut the living heart out of me——"

He was smiling gaily to himself. He knew, as we knew, that she had loved him. Perhaps he had loved her.

He got up, breaking the enchantment.

"You'll be on my side too, won't you?"

He held Lisbeth's hands between his, looking down into her quiet face with an audacious certainty.

"On yours?"

"Well—it is my side. Never mind about Gordon."

"I can't promise. I don't know."

"Not against me, anyhow. Promise that much. Don't listen to Fitzroy."

She withdrew her hand proudly.

"You think me very childish."

"No, only very kind. I'll wait."

He did not press her any further. He shook hands with me too and the clasp of those cool slender fingers

gave me a pleasure that defied my rekindled resentment. I knew that he really liked me, and was oddly sorry for me, but without pity.

4

Lisbeth went with me to the gate. It was dark and cold, like that other night when she and I had said good-bye to one another here. But the very likeness of outward things made the change in me more bitter. The sullen old sycamore brooded over us like a spectral witness against me. The house, the garden, the privet hedge which had so often hidden my boy's ardour in its kindly shadow seemed to say to me, "We are here still. We have waited patiently for you. If you had been sure that night that you would come back to us, you would not have known how to bear the happiness."

But I felt nothing—unless it is possible to suffer because one can't suffer any more.

Lisbeth's hand rested on my arm. I knew that she was trying to speak to me of what was oppressing both of us, and I confronted her sadly, as though she had been a loving and pitying judge who could never even hear my real pleading. She said gently:

"Why are you so unhappy, Euan?"

I could only try hard to be honest.

"I don't know, Lisbeth."

"Can't you tell me?"

"I wish I could—I want to."

"You've been so lucky—haven't you?—compared to other people."

"I know. Perhaps that's why."

"Don't say such strange, puzzling things. I don't understand."

"It's hard for me to understand. It's—it's almost as though I had cheated—run away—escaped."

"But you didn't. You went in at the very beginning. Nobody could reproach you. You ought to be happy, oughtn't you? Because you're safe—and can go back to everything——"

(I found myself thinking of my old battalion. I had just set off to the base on my first leave. I hadn't left them half an hour—a mine exploded. They went up—every man-jack of them—and the fragments came down the wind to me two miles away. There was just this much choice when a thing like that happened. Either one went mad or one stopped feeling altogether. Lucky? Safe? There was something so grotesque about the very words that a kind of sick laughter got me by the throat.)

"Euan—you've changed so."

"I know, dear."

She steadied herself bravely. It has always seemed to me that there is some luminous quality about her. Even in that dark place I could feel the brightness of her hair, the whity gleam of her little pointed face, the fire in those blue eyes.

"You don't love me any more, do you, Euan?"

(My poor prisoner beat desperate hands against the walls of that secret dungeon. I knew—and could do nothing. It was like a hideous spiritual catalepsy that left me free only to say dead words and to make dead gestures.)

"Lisbeth—I do love you."

"I don't feel it somehow—it's all different."

"It's those four years."

And then it was laughable—pathetic—very sweet. Somehow, somewhere, she had caught a glimpse of the

dark wickedness of men. She stood back from me, grave and proud.

"I'm not a child. I know all about life. You mean—there have been—other women?"

My eyes burnt me—a dry, tearless pain.

"There's never been anyone but you. Not for a moment. I've never seen anyone but you—really. I've carried you everywhere."

"Then it seems harder to understand. You're so far away as though I couldn't reach you."

I made one frantic, nerveless effort.

"Oh, my dear, my dear—don't you see—those four years—going against the grain all the time—always doing beastly, abominable things—things that make you sick."

"Didn't you want to fight?"

The earth seemed to crack between us—a fissure that might broaden swiftly to a gulf. I answered with a bleak honesty.

"I hated it. I had to shut down every decent feeling I had—every instinct—everything I believed—if I was to carry on."

"You're not—not a—" She stammered and broke down as though before an indecent word.

"Not a Conscientious Objector—" That was funny too—and sad too. The horrible desire to laugh rushed over me like a nausea. "No, I'd go again. I reasoned it out. For the best to survive one's got to give one's best—not just one's life."

"Oh, that sounds awful—like blasphemy. If you did right, you ought to feel right. You ought to feel satisfied—and proud."

"I don't. I don't believe any of us do. I just want to forget—what I did."

I knew of whom she was thinking then. She could not have helped herself. He challenged me with his splendid doubtlessness. And my love seemed to stand back from its piteous efforts and call a last warning to me.

And then suddenly, as though she had heard too, and with all the passion that lay waiting beneath her young dignity she threw herself into my arms, clinging to me.

"Oh, Euan—I don't understand—I won't try—only love me—please love me."

"I do—I do." I held her close against my breast. Pity, at least, I could feel for both of us. I stammered in my deathly weariness. "Oh, my dear, my sweetheart —try to understand—all those years—I had to do without you—I had to put you out of my thoughts so that I could do my work—I had to make up my mind to give you up so that I shouldn't be a coward—every time I said good-bye to you I had to pretend I didn't care so that I shouldn't cry—had to stop feeling—and now it's become a sort of frightful habit."

"Euan—won't it ever come right?"

"It must. Only have patience with me."

"I don't know—oh, Euan—couldn't we go away—right away—now—from everyone—(and then I knew that she was frightened). Let's be happy again. Marry me. Won't you?"

"Lisbeth—I haven't the right. I'm such a maimed wreck of a lover."

She freed herself, crying a little, ashamed of having thought only of her own grief, stroking me as though I had been a sick child.

"I know—your poor arm—you've suffered so—but you'll forget—it doesn't matter in the end—really. There are worse things than losing an arm, aren't there?"

(Much, much worse. Queer how far away we were

from one another then. And yet at any moment I knew that dreadful stone that held me down in this living grave might lift and by the sheer power of my freed love I should draw her across the gulf to me. There was loveliness and peace somewhere beyond this cold darkness if only I had the strength to break through to it.)

"Lisbeth, it isn't fair to you—it's such a risk."

"I don't care." There was an unfamiliar roughness in her voice. "I'll take it—I want things to be the same again—I want to love you—I want—want to make you happy."

We kissed each other then. Her tears ran against my mouth. If only I could have cried too.

It seemed to me that the tree and the old house and the privet-hedge watched us sadly, with their ancient wisdom.

So are our prayers granted.

IV

1

WHEN I heard that Mackenzie, the Labour Candidate, wasn't to be allowed a fair hearing, I joined his ranks. It seemed that it was he or Gordon for Stoneborough. Pender, the old member, rooted in the conviction that what had been would be, was letting the ground slip from under his feet. And Gordon swamped the place. He was fanning in Stoneborough a temper which it had never shown before—vindictive and hysterical—and my distrust of him became a hatred.

Mackenzie I knew to be a reasonable and decent fellow. He had fought well in the War. He had honest convictions which deserved respect. And under Gordon's open incitement he was being hunted down by the worst elements as though he had been a traitor.

Not that my support did him much good. As Colonel Gay had indicated, I had a name and that was about all. Had I behaved myself normally I might have been considered a normal and even desirable young man with sufficient income and a creditable if unexciting war-record. But there had been suspicion of me in the air for sometime past. The pack flaires a rebel in its midst as swiftly as an open enemy. Now it was known for certain that I was a crank. Perhaps worse. Old friends who had known me as a child treated me with a grave, reproving coldness. The Bishop even, meeting me in the Close, shook his head at me in a speechless protest. None of them came out into the open. They seemed to know in-

stinctively that since I couldn't feel properly they couldn't hurt me. And a man who can't be hurt is dangerous.

I did not go any more into Lisbeth's garden or into Lisbeth's home. My presence in those feverish days would have driven the Colonel's dislike to a frenzied outbreak.

"When it's all over he will forget," Lisbeth said.

So we met in the meadowland by the river and were sad and shy with one another. We never spoke of the things that separated us. She had said, "I don't understand. I won't try." And she was keeping her word. But every day there was less colour in her cheeks. She looked smaller and frailer. To make up for our long silences we held each other's hands in a queer desperate pressure as though someone were dragging us apart. When we kissed we seemed to be asking a mutual forgiveness. She would smile gallantly, but the questioning trouble in those good blue eyes haunted me like a reproach.

I longed for the time when I could get back to my work. I had a conviction that then I should find peace for both of us.

Meantime, there was the election to be lived through.

Aunt Geraldine refused to recognise my political delinquency. I was the head of the family and as such it was impossible for me to be either really mad or really bad. At first her remonstrances were negligently airy. ("You shouldn't bother your head with such things, Euan dear. You're not strong enough")—and once I caught her explaining to the Bishop's wife that "it's his arm, poor fellow," with the mysterious gravity of a medical practitioner trying to give a convincing appearance to an improbable diagnosis. But once she almost pleaded with me.

It was after dinner. I had come in from a rowdy meeting, dishevelled, gloriously near anger (like a sick man who feels life flowing back into him). Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious sat by the fireside. They always dressed for the evening. I used to think their evening dresses rather odd. Now when I know how many transformations they underwent, they seem to me splendid and pathetic, like old threadbare battle standards. Aunt Geradline sat upright with folded hands. It was one of her principles, upheld through a servantless war, that no matter how low you were brought during the daytime, after dinner you resumed your natural status of a lady whose communications with the servants' hall are made through the butler or the cook. Miss Cornelious, modern and reckless, with her grey hair already tousled, smoked fiercely.

Aunt Geraldine watched me sadly as I performed my acquired juggling trick of stuffing a pipe with one hand.

"Aren't you very tired, Euan?"

"Rather. We had a rough time. I didn't know there were so many hooligans in Stoneborough."

"We never met them," Aunt Geraldine explained. "And I do wish you didn't meet them now, Euan. I suppose you feel you must. But why you should support someone who wants to exterminate you I don't understand."

"Mackenzie doesn't want to exterminate me—only put me in my place. Anyhow, I'd rather fight for my life against an honest man than owe it to a blackguard."

"But Sir Felix isn't a blackguard, dear."

"Who says he isn't?"

"Why, everyone believes in him. Even Colonel Gay."

"Colonel Gay's mad."

"Euan, you're making it very hard for Lisbeth."

"And you're a very cunning old woman," I said, forcing a lightness I didn't feel—"sailing very near blackmail."

She sighed.

"You're so prejudiced. Sir Felix wants to be a real friend to us. He does understand our point of view. The last time he was here he was saying how he believed in the influence of tradition. 'There's one thing I want to see,' he said—'a Fitzroy back up there in the Castle.' "

That stung me. It was as though some coarse-tongued fellow were trying to act intermediary between two shy and secret lovers. What did he know of Old Stoneborough and me, of how we belonged to one another, and could never belong to one another again?

"Well, that's very fine of him. This Fitzroy, at least, doesn't want to go."

"Euan—you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. The day for all that sort of thing is dead and buried. And no one knows that better than old Gordon. No modern man in his right senses wants to live among draughts and rats."

"Euan!" said Miss Cornelious, imperatively.

I hadn't mean to speak like that. I was excited and overwrought. I can see now how crude and brutal I was. Aunt Geraldine never so much as unfolded her hands. But all the life seemed to drain out of that ugly fine old face and she became a ghost. Miss Cornelious, after one pain-stricken glance at her, scowled me down. She made me feel as though I had killed something.

"Every new generation wants to build for itself," I muttered.

Even now when I think of that evening and those two old ladies, my heart hurts me. Other pains grow numb, but if you have been unkind to an old woman, even un-

wittingly, you will never forget or forgive yourself. And in my blind young egotism, wrapped in my own griefs, I did not see what I was doing.

I went out of the room and Miss Cornelious followed me. I feel sure now that she meant to tell me the truth, but that she changed her mind. Perhaps she was honour bound too. I don't know. She stood between me and my line of retreat, her little withered hands clenched, her brown eyes blinking up at me from under the shaggy grey hair.

"You must be very kind to your aunt, Euan," she said. "She's troubled about you and this election business. So am I. It's not as though I'd mind a revolution myself. But you know as well as I do—she's not strong enough."

The brown eyes grew fierce. I felt sure that she was seeing tumbrils and herself in some heroic part (perhaps stabbing poor young Mackenzie in his bath). And then she saw that I knew and looked horribly ashamed. And a moment later we were both laughing helplessly. It seemed to me that I hadn't laughed like that since I was a boy and that I was almost well again. If Lisbeth had come upon me then, I should have swept her into my arms and nothing else would have mattered. It was like a break in a suffocating fog.

"It's too bad of you, Euan. You always laugh at me——"

"We're all jokes, Corny," I retorted—"huge jokes, if we could only see the point."

So whatever she had tried to say was not said and I was to know nothing until it was too late.

2

I met him the afternoon before polling day, coming out of the little Roman Catholic Church that stands like a watchful exile by the North Gate of the Cathedral Close. I saw him before me. He stood for a moment on the steps, bare-headed, the faint wind from the river ruffling the smooth bronze hair, and I thought I had never seen a man look so utterly at peace. There are pictures of saints and martyrs and medieval heroes amongst whom his serenity would not have been, as it seemed to be here in our midst, a blazing anachronism.

Then he saw me and nodded and came down the steps to link his arm through mine with a perfect friendliness.

"All my sins have been forgiven me," he said.

It was as though he were asking me to share in his good fortune. I answered with less irony than I intended.

"You're lucky."

"Of course I am. You wretched, dour-faced old Puritan! What do you know about the peace that passeth all understanding?"

"I can believe in it. I don't know it."

"Of course you don't. How on earth should you? Coming my way?"

"I don't know which your way is." (There was no suggestion in his tone that he might come mine.)

"I am going to the Gays for tea. Did they ask you?"

My heart had given a fierce thud and then had seemed to stand still. I heard myself laugh.

"They did not. The poor Colonel would have a fit. I'm like a red rag to a bull these days."

"So I gathered. But I don't see why he should dislike you personally. I don't—even though you are going to marry Lisbeth."

"Who told you that?"

"She did. Isn't it true?"

"It's true all right," I said, "only we were to have kept it to ourselves until this storm blew over."

"She went out of her way to tell me." (There was a faint, an almost tender amusement in his voice.) "Perhaps she was afraid I was falling in love with her. Anyhow," he added, "it's rather difficult to see your point in deliberately making yourself unpopular."

"About these accursed politics, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"It's not deliberate. I can't help myself—any more than I could help going into that beastly war."

"Sheer interferingness?" he suggested.

"If you like. Pender's no good. I hate your man. He's playing a dirty game."

"Of course, he is."

"And you're backing him."

"I explained all that. If he doesn't get in, I stand to lose Quetzelango. Ever heard of the San Juan gold mine?"

"Never."

He made a sound like a smothered laugh.

"Good for you. Lots of other people have. Gordon's losing his head. These clever fellows who spring from nowhere nearly always do——" He must have read my thought for he added, with a side-long glance of amusement: "I come from Old Stoneborough too, you know."

"It remains to be seen where you go to," I retorted.

"Oh, Quetzelango to begin with. Of course, I don't pretend to like Gordon's methods. They're out-of-place. He made his pile in countries where they were perfectly suitable and he can't adapt himself. I expect trouble. My own tastes run to direct action. I'd far rather hit your

precious Mackenzie over the head with a battle-axe and make a clean finish. But I can't and I'm prepared to use the ordinary legal methods."

"Ruffianism and lying promises."

"What a mercy they are lying." He pressed my arm. "Supposing we really did get the Kaiser's head—what the hell should we do with it? Bury it with full honours in the Chapter, I suppose. And that reminds me. Somebody told me you were speaking for Mackenzie in the market-place tonight."

"Well?"

"Well, don't. That's all."

"Why not?"

"There's going to be a row. You really are rather unpopular, you know, Fitzroy. You've annoyed your own people who think you either a lunatic or a Bolshevik or both, and the other side has got you marked down as a damned humbug—an aristocrat with a fat income patronising the downs and outs of the Great War. And, believe me, the latter are in a nasty temper."

That was true anyway. The vaunted comradeship, forged in blood and agony, had gone the way of all the other fine-sounding ideals in whose name we had endured the beastliness of war. Even old Hopejoy wouldn't look me in the eyes now.

"There doesn't seem any place for men like me," I said. "We're traitors anyway. Off to the guillotine with us!"

"Or the duck-pond," he said softly.

"Is that what Gordon is organising for my benefit?"

"Of course not—not officially."

"Aren't you going rather against your own side by warning me?"

"I don't want you hurt. Besides it would be very bad

policy for you to be hurt. In some ways Gordon is a perfect fool."

I took a long look at him. The finely cut adventuring profile gave me no clue to what was really in his mind. I asked curiously:

"Well, being what I am, what should I do?"

"Keep out of things—or go back to where you belong—or—" He turned to meet my eyes with a queer little smile—"or give up all that thou hast."

"You're confoundedly Biblical this afternoon," I said drily.

"Only logical," he retorted. "You're trying to be in two places at once and you'll only hurt yourself. Not that I'm trying to goad you into doing anything rash. If you chucked your money to the four winds, it would only make things harder—for Lisbeth, I mean—and they're hard enough already."

I pulled up short.

"Can't you leave Lisbeth out of our conversations?" I asked, stammering.

He seemed genuinely astonished.

"How can I? Doesn't she concern us both more than anything in the world?"

"Does she concern you like that?"

"You mean—I've no right to be concerned?"

"I suppose I do."

"I want her," he said simply.

There was an indescribable largeness about that answer. It seemed to cover vast tracts of feeling—more than any outburst of passion could have done. And it was imperative too. I felt for the first time that his love was not a mere reckless adventure of the spirit, but a terrific force in him. I walked on, unconscious that his arm still rested on mine.

"Well, it's for her to choose," I said.

"She has chosen," he answered.

His frankness was more baffling than any subtlety. It led you on and left you nowhere.

"I suppose you will go to-night?" he asked.

"You know I will."

"Yes, I do. I shouldn't have mentioned that duck-pond. Well, I've warned you."

"You've done your damnedest to make me go," I admitted.

We had reached the Gays' house. His hand rested on the gate. His curious light blue eyes met mine with a kind of whimsical regret.

"I hate your not being able to come in. It'll spoil everything—to think of your standing there—shut out of Paradise."

"You're an outrage—an indecency," I flung back at him. "And I still wish I could punch your head."

But in truth I had never liked him as I did then. There had been real feeling in his voice. He loved Lisbeth. And so he knew that the dim low house contained all the loveliness in the world.

He turned, adding casually over his shoulder:

"And if you won't consider yourself, you might consider poor Mackenzie. You know—you're a rotten speaker."

I lingered for a moment after the door had closed upon him. It was true. I did feel shut out. And I wanted to go in and make my peace and sit by the fire with them as in the old days. I wanted dreadfully—(dreadfully because it was all so dead and hopeless) to throw off the self I had become and be just the self that those two had loved and understood. I felt homesick as a lost child—and sad as the prodigal must have done who

knew that however many fatted calves they killed for him he could never be one of his own people again—never forget what he knew.

A light sprang up joyfully in the dark house. I turned away.

It was my heart coming back to life again, and hurting horribly.

3

The Committee room was jammed with men and a sprinkling of women. I did not know any of them. It was difficult to believe they were Stoneborough people at all. They were born "strays." A few of them, like Mackenzie, knew what they wanted and believed in it, calmly and sternly. The majority were just conscience-ridden people without much brains and with fanatic temperaments who knew that there was something cruelly wrong with the world and couldn't rest about it. One or two would never be happy except in a persecuted minority. I suppose every cause, good and bad, from Christianity downwards—has been carried on the shoulders of just such people.

They talked incessantly, at the top of their voices. Even the tattered, red-printed posters gave the walls a look of being bespattered with noise. I think we all rather wanted to cover up the quiet, murderous undertones from the market-place outside. We felt like a small, badly armed garrison that was about to make a hopeless sally against barbarians who had no notions as to the rules of warfare.

Mackenzie and his agent were both new to the game. They had come straight into it from the Army and were a queer rather pathetic mixture of the untameable idealist and the disciplined soldier. And if they had never been

afraid before, they were afraid now. I did not blame them —I envied them. I felt detached and amused in a hateful sort of way. It seemed to me funny that anyone should hope anything from themselves or anyone else or that they should mind what happened. And I suppose it really was rather funny that Sir Euan Fitzroy, well-dressed and well-fed—almost sleek I seemed to myself by comparison—should be preparing to go to the lions with this odd starving little company. I knew too that I wasn't wanted. Even Mackenzie, though he professed to throw a wide net, found me an embarrassment.

"There's going to be a hell of a row," he said in a flurried interval. "Sure you want to be in it, Fitzroy?"

"I don't want to," I answered. "I feel I've got to."

He considered me rather woefully. I didn't look like a fanatic driven by an overwhelming passion for martyrdom. I looked probably what I felt—damnably indifferent.

"You're a queer fish," he said.

"I fancy there are a lot more like me in the sea," I returned.

"I wish I knew what your idea is." (He meant 'game,' but was polite enough not to say it.) "You don't belong to us and you don't believe in us."

"I don't seem to belong anywhere and I don't believe in anything. I'm just drifting in the hopes I'll barge into a faith and a place in the scheme of things. I'm sorry if I'm a nuisance. But after all I shan't have a chance to speak and if they duck me instead of you it will be all to the good."

"But your arm."

"Oh, damn my arm!" I said wearily. "I'm sick of it."

Then his natural generosity overcame him.

"It's ripping of you to come along. What a rotten

business! You'd think from those howling idiots out there that we were after their beer or their lives. Gordon must have beaten up all the drunken scum for forty miles round."

"It won't help him." The agent had bustled up. "He won't get in."

"Who will then?" I asked.

"We shall. All that noise—" he snapped his fingers—"doesn't mean so much. Anyhow we're going to challenge him when the time comes. There's been hanky-panky. Of course, there always is—but this is too thick."

My ignorance of Committee room atmosphere prevented my discounting his optimism. I asked, "What's too thick?"

"His methods. Smith's all right. Smith's too clever. But he's gone behind Smith. And we've been nosing out his career. It stinks."

"But he was knighted," I reminded him cynically. The agent hooted.

"That's what made us wonder what was the matter with him. Ever heard of the San Juan mine?"

"This is the second time."

"Well, you'll hear of it again. Lord, it's eight o'clock. We'd better get a move on."

Somebody opened the shop-door and the roar of voices surged in over us like a tidal wave. Mackenzie went white. But he had nerve. He grinned at me rather bitterly.

"The Germans were child's play," he said.

We went out in single file. All the late comers who hadn't been able to get near the speakers' platforms were waiting for us. They gave a cry like a pack of hounds with the quarry in sight. I didn't recognize either the market-place or the people. Both had a wicked look.

Gordon had thrown up a cinema screen on the houses opposite and through the finely etched lines of a miserable rain you could see Sir Felix going to the Investiture at Buckingham Palace, Sir Felix in his sumptuous London office, Sir Felix as a bluff, downright English gentleman in tweeds with a rose bush behind him, smoking a comfortable cigar and promising Stoneborough peace and plenty, untold reparations and the Kaiser on the gibbet. Some enthusiast was playing a cornet somewhere. You couldn't catch the tune, but every now and then a blaring, brassy sound, like the howl of an enraged animal, broke through the ground-swell of voices. Gordon had left the field clear to us. He had washed his hands in innocency. But his empty platform, lit by flaring angry torches, displayed his posters with their vociferous denunciations—their vulgar savage incitements. I could see the lanterns which marked our destination swaying uneasily like warning beacons in a black tossing sea.

The mud squelched under our feet. I slipped and fell against a man who threw me off with a grin that made me think of one of these half-comic devils in a medieval picture of the Last Judgment. Some ancient prejudice of the blood stirred in me. I could have killed him gladly. I loathed them all—the white gaping faces thrust into mine, the smell of their breath and their dirty rain-soaked clothing. They seemed to me not so much evil as obscenely silly. The idea that I had ever pretended to be their comrade in a fight for anything so vastly stupid as Humanity was nauseating. The Germans were right. Cannon fodder. The Bolsheviks were right, too, perhaps. There was only one real nationality—the nationality of class.

They pushed against me—jerked at my coat-sleeve like malicious monkeys. There was nothing to indicate that

my arm has been broken in three places. I couldn't blame them. But the pain awoke a cold ugly rage. I wouldn't have turned back then, even if it had been possible. I should have been glad of some violent collision which would wipe me out and the whole squalor and beastliness of living. Even Lisbeth seemed like a figure in that eternal Fata Morgana leading men to perpetuate the senseless jests against themselves. I suppose if ever a human being touched bottom mentally and spiritually, I did in those few minutes.

"Bolshie—I say—look at our Lord Bolshie. Where's your pal, the Kaiser, me Lord?"

That struck them as outrageously funny. They rocked with laughter. They stood on tip-toe, open-mouthed with that strange oddly horrible look of good-humoured irresponsibility which is seen only in crowds. But they weren't angry as yet. They weren't cruel. Individually, it wasn't in them to hurt anyone. Collectively, they were as incalculable as a pack of hysterical wolves.

Somehow we reached our destination. Mackenzie with his bodyguard had gone off to his own platform. Whether he reached it or not I never knew. My chairman, a weedy, shop-keeper's assistant who had already lost his job over this business, gave me a hand up on to our lorry. Someone pushed me from behind. (For they wanted their victim in full view.) I nearly lost my footing again and there was more laughter. The whole thing had become indescribably ignominious and unheroic, but I wasn't conscious of any humiliation. I'd got beyond that.

I seemed to be standing very high up and very much alone. My companion held a shaky lantern over my head as though he were trying to display me, and its light flickered over the foam of faces that broke against my

refuge. The lorry rocked ominously like a small stranded vessel in the first wave of a rising tide. I knew at once that I was not to be allowed to speak. Well, according to John Smith, that wouldn't hurt Mackenzie much. And what should I have said anyhow—that they deserved all that they got—war and hunger and misery—and that no one could save them from themselves?

They began to sing. They were ironical and sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow," amidst hoots and catcalls, and then "Tipperary." But they dropped that quickly with a shame that was the beginning of their exasperation. It was then I noticed the man standing immediately beneath me. He was drunk and his grotesque efforts to climb up into the lorry fanned the ominous laughter round us. But he himself was terribly in earnest. I knew him. He was Hopejoy's son. He had been a good-looking, decent fellow. He kept on shouting in a monotonous sing-song.

"Cap'en—you listen to me—what 'ave they done at my girl—where's my job—I wants me rights—I'm a sober, God-fearing man—there ain't no justice—and why not —You tell me that, Cap'en."

The sweat and rain ran down his red up-turned face and made a mat of the fair hair. His eyes in the unsteady light had a glazed tragic look like that of a goaded bull whose very violence is a sort of pathetic appeal.

"You get back to your spiritual home, Sir Euan."

"Stoneborough don't want none of your damn Bolshevism."

"Hang the Kaiser—make the Germans pay."

"Wot we win the war for?"

"A-ah—give 'em socks."

"Wot abaht the *Lusitania?*"

"Chuck 'em in the Weir."

I heard my little shop-assistant stammering in an agony of nerves.

"I don't think it's any good. We'd better get out. They mean mischief."

I knew they meant mischief. I knew also that it wasn't possible to get out. I didn't want to. It struck me as distinctly humourous that a Fitzroy should be ducked in the Weir when for venturing to protest against a corn levy a Fitzroy had brought the whole town about the ears of the protestors. A sort of malicious retribution.

Something filthy struck me in the face. I suppose I flinched. I know I did not put up my hand. I went suddenly cold with loathing. Oh, it must have been good to come clattering down the hill with one's men-at-arms to wipe out all this silly beastliness with fire and sword.

"Sir Euan—Sir Euan—they're trying to turn the lorry over."

Much I cared. I could feel them at work behind us tittering and guffawing in their savage fun. Well, if they hated me, I hated them. They were quite right; it was sheer humbug to pretend that we belonged to one another. One or other had to go under and if it was our turn I wouldn't run away as they had done when my people had ridden them down in this very square. There would be that difference between us always.

Cold and hard as a stone I felt.

"Put 'em both in—do 'em good—Germans need a bath."

The lorry tilted forward—fell back again with a jerk that nearly threw us off our feet. There was a crazy rush. Young Hopejoy came over the side, carried on the shoulders of the men behind like a cork on the crest of a wave. He fell against me, and dropped to the floor of

the lorry, sprawling helplessly. I had at that moment a clear and almost exultant conviction that once down in that mob there would be no chance for us. They didn't mean any great harm, but the control had gone out of their hands. A pathetic voice piped piteously in my ear.

"The police—they ought to send for the police."

I nearly laughed. Poor Sergeant Baxter with his rotund easy-going retinue who had never had anything more violet to do than regulate the traffic! I could imagine him on the outskirts of this incredible spectacle —scratching his head, helpless, horrified.

I had to catch hold of the side to prevent myself from being tilted out. I saw my chairman leap overboard like a man from a sinking ship into a black sea. They let him go. They knew who was up against them. It was me they wanted. Hopejoy's son squirmed at my feet. He had caught hold of my arm. I nearly shouted at him, "Let go, you fool!" But I set my teeth in time. I wasn't going to ask for quarter. Nor could I free myself. He had my arm in both hands and was pulling at it with a drunken strength.

"Why's my girl chucked me, Cap'en? I'll tell you— because I was a 'ero and went to that bloody war."

I could only think of the pain. I went blind with pain. I went down into deep seas of it clinging to one purpose —not to cry out. I did hear a groan. It seemed to echo on interminably inside my skull, but I don't believe it was ever uttered. There were other men on the lorry now, pushing me towards the edge, laughing and shouting. In the midst of all that uproar I seemed to hear the bone snap like a crack of thunder.

They would have me down in a minute. I was sick and faint and drenched with sweat. I wanted it to be over. But young Hopejoy had grown quiet. He still

held my arm, but he was gaping down at it, like a frightened child. I suppose there was something rather horrible in the feel of the thing.

"Gawd, Guv'nor—wot's 'appened?"

"It—d-doesn't matter," I gasped. "It was done before, you know."

The whole incident couldn't have lasted more than a second. We were looking at one another in the eyes. The pain seemed to have flung me up on to some high lonely place with this man. We saw each other clearly for the first time—both bankrupt in everything that mattered—cheated, baffled. It wasn't my pain anymore—and his loss was mine—everybody's. I didn't hate now. It seemed incredible that I should have hated. I heard myself saying in an eager, apologetic sort of way:

"It doesn't matter at all—not your fault, Hopejoy." He was crying.

I didn't know what had happened. I don't know now. Things like that aren't to be explained. But they do happen. They happened on the road to Damascus and they happen to little men in a little way perhaps once in a lifetime. Your head breaks through the clouds—I was crazily happy because young Hopejoy cried. The black curse had been lifted from my mind. The prison door had been flung open. I wanted to shout to everyone—to all these fellow-prisoners to come out with us. They wanted to smash me up—would smash me up perhaps. That didn't make any difference. It was all a stupid mistake. No use in venting our loss and bitterness and disillusionment on one another. There was only one way out of this mess—to have compassion. I suppose I was beside myself with pain and with the wonder of my release. That didn't matter either—so long as one got hold of the truth in time. Why when you come to think

of it, it was as old as the hills—we'd been talking about it for nearly two thousand years anyway—and we hadn't even yet got it into our heads—much less our hearts.

And there in the midst of it all I had a vision of Lisbeth. I saw her with the eyes of my first love. My heart seemed to rush out to meet her. My God—how magnificent, how splendid to love like this! What things I had to say to her!

Young Hopejoy was hitting out wildly at the faces that came boiling over the lorry's sides.

"Leave him alone—'e ain't no German—you blasted idiots—he's hurt; I've broke his bloody arm."

It didn't help much. They bundled him on one side. They had got me between them, twisting that wretched limb as though it had belonged to a sawdust doll. Still that strange exalted feeling remained like a light shining through a mist of blood.

They let me go. It was like being dropped by a whirlwind. I should have fallen if young Hopejoy hadn't caught me round the waist. At first I was too dazed to know what had happened to distract their attention from me. Then I saw him. Of course, I had known he would come. He couldn't keep out of a show like this.

It made me think of a Blake picture. It was fantastic and mad—very nearly absurd—and splendid too. He came riding bareback on a huge stallion that he must have commandeered on its way from a show, for it was trapped with ribbons that fluttered gaily like the caparison of a knight's charger. In the mingled flare and darkness the beast had a Satanic majesty. Even from where I stood I could see the menacing eye, the fire that seemed to leap from the bronze terrific quarters. I don't know how he controlled it. One hand was wound into the plaited mane, the other carried an officer's riding-crop.

The two of them came ploughing through the people like a great leviathan through a stormy sea. And they gave way—stampeded—treading on one another—shouting—fighting to get out of range of those deadly hoofs.

He was cursing them too and laughing. I could see his lips moving and the gay exultancy of his face. But he was in high earnest. A man snatched at him to pull him off and I saw his riding-crop come down full across the eyes with a ruthlessness that made me, even then, wince all over my body. The man went down like a blade of corn before the scythe. And after that no one tried to stop him.

He came up alongside, manoeuvring his great beast by heel and hand with an amazing power.

"Get on in front of me," he ordered.

I shook my head at him.

"No—I'm damned if I do."

"You'll be damned if you don't. Don't take an unfair advantage, Fitzroy. You've no right to get yourself killed just to annoy me."

Someone urged me from behind. It must have been young Hopejoy. Now I came to think of it, I didn't want to be killed either. There was something to live for. I was alive again. But my strength had gone.

"Sorry—don't think I can manage it."

"Jump—I'll hold fast."

I had a queer, an absolute confidence in him. I made a blundering, headlong effort and it was done. He was behind me, holding me close to him as though I had been a child. I heard the angry shouting change its key. They were laughing too now—beginning to cheer even. It had been a glorious row. They had meant to chuck me into the Weir and now they were glad and touched because he had saved me from them.

I don't remember much of that strange ride. I could feel the easy beautiful movement of the great beast under me and the steady arm about my waist. Presently, we were in a quiet street. There were people about us—but different people who seemed to be sorry and anxious and ashamed. I slipped off somehow, lurching against iron railings, fighting a deathly sickness. In the lamplight I could see the stallion looming up like a beast of the Apocalypse and John Smith standing very close to me.

"I'm afraid you're hurt, Fitzroy."

I gave an absurd, cracked little laugh.

"Rather funny—isn't it? To go through the Great War and then—nearly get oneself killed—in an election."

I knew I was going. I wanted to say something about Lisbeth—that she was not to be frightened—that everything was going to be all right now. My voice died in my throat. I saw John Smith's face—close to mine—I was submerged in the sudden knowledge that whatever happened to us two I'd love this man.

I suppose I pitched into his arms. I don't remember.

4

This time the arm had to come off. Blood-poisoning followed and for weeks I was absorbed, body and soul, in the obstinate effort to live. I heard rumours of great events afar off, but I could pay them no attention. I felt that if I turned my eyes aside for an instant, death would get under my guard.

People came and went like shadows. But when Lisbeth came, it was like light flooding over me. Even with my eyes closed in unconquerable weakness, I knew when she sat beside me by the sudden easing of pain, the sense

of well-being. I believed in miracles. I had a calm, childlike conviction that when she laid her hand on mine strength flowed into me. She was very young still, in all things except that innate mysterious knowledge of women, very ignorant of life, and yet there was such wisdom in that hand. All through the ages men have hymned women as beings different from themselves—nearer God—and have been laughed at since for self-deceivers. But I came to know that they were right. In the fineness of a fine woman there is a mystic quality which almost frightens us like a glimmer of light that has never been on sea or land.

As I grew stronger I loved to lie and watch her. For every lovely bend of that red-gold head, the swinging lithesomeness that gave her slender body a sweet unconscious dignity, were all the outward expression of that secret grace in her. Only she seemed to me too frail—almost wan-looking—as though her heart were beating itself to death.

Once I tried to say something of my fear for her and she sat beside me, with her hand on mine, bending very close so that I should not see her eyes.

"You're not to worry about me or anything, Euan, you see—I do understand now."

I smiled to myself. I knew that wasn't really true. I was her lover who had travelled hand in hand with her through her childhood and girlhood and then suddenly, at the crisis of our youth, had turned aside and left her and gone off alone into a strange terrible country. What I had seen and learnt there she could never understand. But all that didn't matter now. Because I had a love so passionate and high and strong that there were no gulfs or barriers that I could not pass to come to her.

"I love you, Lisbeth, I love you."

I brooded over these words.

It seemed to me that I said something wonderful and new that no one could ever have said before. I tried to move and shyly, rather sadly, she put her hand to my hot, hungry lips.

And then I drowsed again and all through my journey of black pain that followed she seemed to walk before me like a guiding pillar of fire.

One day, suddenly, it was over. I had come through. I was safe home again. Then for the first time I heard clearly of what had happened. Miss Cornelious told me, sitting on the edge of my bed, a tousled, woe-be-gone figure pathetically like some small long-haired terrier that had lost itself in a terrific storm.

It seemed that in Quetzelango a certain ex-President had come down like an avenging Attila, from his hiding place in the hills and had returned to power over the bodies of his old persecutors. Incidentally, he reclaimed a certain property—the San Juan Finca with its prospective gold mine—the strange result being that in far-off Stoneborough (which would have been hard put to it to place Quetzelango on the map) many people had lost all that they had to lose—and even more.

Aunt Geraldine among them.

Sir Felix Gordon had been defeated. At the last moment a disgust for the violence which he stood for had turned the tide against him. Pender retained his seat, thus providing to his own satisfaction, no doubt, that so long as you sit still and do nothing, nothing will happen.

Sir Felix Gordon was dead. Murdered. In his own garden. And John Smith lay in Stoneborough Gaol, awaiting trial.

"You see, he had a way with him," Miss Cornelious said.

"Buccaneers so often have, Corny," I murmured.

She threw me a fierce, suspicious glance. She was explaining, not defending. One symptom of blame in my part and she would have pounced, ill as I was, and, figuratively shaken me.

"Your aunt wasn't the only one to be taken in. He took in everybody—even Mayor Maceneth who was in business before the War. He seemed to know things by magic—about you and Old Stoneborough, for instance. He talked as though it really mattered to him. Twenty thousand pounds, he said, was a mere nothing if you knew your way about."

"Why twenty thousand pounds in particular?" I ventured.

"That's what Mersteins want for Old Stoneborough."

"I don't understand."

"No, my dear, that's because you don't care. But your aunt cared. You see, she's always meant it to come back to you. Always. Your aunt is a very reserved woman, Euan. It's difficult for her to talk of what she feels. But that was her one ambition. It's been the background to everything. We used to sit up late at night, thinking how it could be done. Of course, if I had written a 'best-seller'—what with the film rights and the serial rights, you know—but then I never did."

"Thank God for that, Corny dear."

She sighed a very faint reproach.

"I know. Draughts and rats. We hadn't thought of it like that. The evening you told us how you felt—it hurt her terribly. It knocked the bottom out of her life. It's all for the best now. It doesn't so much matter—that we've lost everything."

"The old blackguard!" I muttered, remorse-stricken and inconsequent.

Miss Cornelious defended him rather wistfully.

"Perhaps he was sincere—in his own way. I expect he was so accustomed to taking risks himself that he thought everybody did and liked it. Anyhow, he's dead now."

"Do people really think Smith killed him?"

"I don't know. But they're all on his side. He's a sort of hero. They'd have liked to kill Gordon themselves. There's an awful lot of bitter feeling."

"I don't wonder. And—the Colonel—and Lisbeth?"

I'd been funking that question. I hardly knew why. Miss Cornelious' nervous little hands fluttered out.

"Oh, my dear, no one knows what Lisbeth feels these days. She goes about like a dream. She's had such a terrible time—with you, of course. And then the Commander was a friend of theirs, wasn't he? The Colonel says if he didn't kill Gordon, he ought to have done. But then the Colonel is such a violent man—" She broke off looking at me anxiously. "I'm afraid I've tired you, Euan. I had to explain. Your poor aunt, she wouldn't come near you—she's been so ashamed—she feels she's had a hand in something dishonourable. She says if it had only been horses—betting, you know. Lots of Fitzroys were ruined that way. You must be very kind to her, Euan. It's almost broken her heart."

"You leave her to me," I said.

She looked back at me from the door.

"And you're not to worry. I shall write a serial at once—it will be all right."

When she had gone I lay still for a time. It was pretty hard to disentangle all she had told from my fever-dreams. I wasn't even sure whether John Smith had really ridden through the mob to my rescue. I had seen him so often since—each time a little changed—larger—

heroic. Once, that was the night they operated—I seemed to be standing alone in a long dark road and he came out of the twilight on a great bronze horse that was caparisoned in battle mail. And he himself wore the dress in which I had first seen him, carrying his two-edged sword, and gazing ahead of him with that familiar look of high expectancy. I could see the whiteness of his face in which the ice-blue eyes blazed like stars. I could see myself too —with the curious detachment of a dream—a poorly dressed fellow, very obstinate, who couldn't or wouldn't get out of the way.

And he rode me down. He grew enormous. He blotted out every other vision. But he didn't even see me. And the hoofs of his great charger ground my arm to powder.

No, it wasn't difficult to believe that he should kill anyone who stood in his way. But had Gordon done that? Why he had supported Gordon, and one knew somehow that he did not act on impulse, but with his eyes on the future. The whole thing seemed wilder than my dreams. I tried to fancy him in prison, coerced by a prison's frigid discipline, and I was suddenly quite sure that whether he was guilty or not they wouldn't keep him. He had been in tighter places before. Danger was his life's business.

I thought of Lisbeth. Yes—she was very still these days — frighteningly still. She was always doing the things for me that ought to have made me happy, and once I had caught an aching tenderness in her eyes as though she knew too that that wasn't enough. She might have been a mother with a sick child, whom, with all her love, she couldn't help. And I had said suddenly—out of my heart, not knowing why, "It doesn't matter. I want *you* to be happy." And she had knelt down, her head

against my breast, and cried. She cried so seldom. It frightened me—even now.

Then I thought of those two old women—plotting so passionately—and caught in the claws of an unscrupulous greed and plucked and flung aside. But I had hurt them worse than anyone.

I crawled out of bed and struggled into a dressing-gown whose limp arms seemed to evade me with a horrible flapping obstinacy. My last nurse had gone that day. I felt like a prisoner making a dash for freedom. It wasn't much of a dash. The room pitched and tossed sickeningly. And how I got down the stairs I don't know. I believe I bumped myself from step to step like a baby and slid along the wall to the drawing-room like a drunken man. It had been a beautiful room, fastidious, with a serene, delicate dignity that seemed always, even in the depth of winter, to smell of spring flowers. Now I don't know what breath of decay and ruin met me. My aunt, seated alone by the black and empty grate, might have been the grey ghost of the room's dead self. Even in that first uncertain glimpse of her I saw how changed she was, battered and bruised and bewildered, but still gallantly upright, in the austerely tidy, shabby dress.

"Euan—how foolish—how could you?"

I didn't waste my scanty breath explaining. I got to her somewhow before she was on her feet and crouched down beside her, tailor-fashion, neatly disguising the fact that I couldn't have stood another moment.

"A case of Mahommed and the Mountain, Aunt. You've neglected me and so here I am."

She put her hand on my shoulder, pressing it hard.

"I came to tell you, Aunt, what I think of you."

"A very stupid old woman, Euan."

"A Trojan—my heroine in real life," I forced all the

flippancy I could into my none too steady voice. "If I were to think too much about you I'd cry helplessly. I'm not very strong yet and besides I haven't got a handkerchief."

She gave a queer croaking little laugh.

"I wanted you to go home so much. It *was* home to me. I used to live there with your father—when we were children. I'd forgotten that I belonged to another generation—that young people have different ideas to ours."

"About draughts and rats? Aunt, I didn't mean it. There was something wrong with me. I didn't seem able to say anything I meant. One can't talk easily of things one loves, can one? I love home too—but I knew I couldn't ever go back. It was meant for large-scale people—like you. I'm just a small ordinary fellow."

She shook her head. But she was past speaking. The winter's dusk descended slowly on us. We hardly ever kissed one another. I rubbed my cheek over her old hand and she cried openly, but very quietly, not so much as bending her head, but despising the tears which rolled down onto the old silk dress. I pretended not to see or hear.

"Why didn't you light the fire, Aunt?" Then I guessed and exploded with all the violence at my disposal. "You're right. A stupid old woman. You've been freezing and brooding here over nothing at all. Money! Pooh! I've enough for dozens of us."

She shook her head fiercely.

"I won't have you handicapped more than you are."

"But that's just what has been the matter with me. I'm not handicapped. I ought to be. I'm a sort of Peace-Embusque. If ever I'm to look myself in the face, I've got to start square with all the rest of us."

She drew me close to her with a stiff unaccustomed tenderness.

"You're the first of us to be a little mad," she said—"but I'm fond of you."

"Pals, eh what, Aunt."

"Certainly, Euan—always." And then: "You must be very good to your Aunt Corny too, won't you? You see—her last book—she's having difficulty—the publishers are so stupid. It's worrying her."

"I'll publish it myself, Aunt. And it'll be a best-seller and make the crowd of them look silly."

After a little when we were both calmer, she took me upstairs again, rather severe and dictatorial in manner, and tucked me up in bed like a very-late-in-life mother, rather astonished at herself, tucking up a small and most astonishing son.

V

1

STONEBOROUGH was an unfamiliar place in those days. When I remembered it as it had been—so orderly, so decent, so kindly—I felt like a traveller whose landmarks have been torn up by an earthquake. It wasn't the War—though I suppose the War had shaken us more than we knew. We had kept our calm through the worst days. It was this business of Gordon and Gordon's murder. There was a family that had lost three sons at Neuve Chapelle. They had borne their grief in silence and dignity. Now they were venemous and hysterical. It seemed almost that people can face loss of life better than they can face the loss of money.

There is this to be said for us. We hadn't had a murder for fifty years. And this was our personal affair. It didn't seem to us that it concerned anyone else. We resented the newspaper correspondents who came down upon us from all parts of the country, filling the Pilgrims' Inn with rumour and disorder. We resented the intrusion of the Judge himself. I think most of us felt, like Aunt Geraldine, that we had been dragged down by our folly into something shameful. (Incidentally, this did not prevent the Pilgrim's Inn from doing a roaring trade or our local daily from raising its circulation with unrecognisable portraits of Commander Smith, V.C., D.S.O., M.C., and a full-page photo of Lizzie Smith's sweet-shop which we all knew like our own faces.)

We talked of nothing else. The people who had been most completely hoodwinked were the most bitter. They were decent people at bottom. They did not believe either in lynch law or murder. But they were glad Gordon was dead. They hoped, I think, that his dying had given him time to realise that it served him right. As to John Smith, they denied his guilt with a violence that covered over a grim and secret satisfaction.

Colonel Gay, who had almost forgotten his bitterness against me in his rage against the dead man, spoke for the community.

"There are people who ought to swing for this," he told everyone, "—not Smith, but the damn scoundrels who knighted another scoundrel and let him come here to prey on honest people."

His precious invention lay in fragments. He never touched it again. The whole force of the warped narrow mind had set itself on hounding the culprit even beyond the grave. And it was strange how his monotonous reiterations brought the thinnest blood to boiling point so that even a man like Rogers, a gentle-spirited fellow, almost crushed by his personal disaster, had an ugly look in the eyes.

The whole story filtered out, little by little. And somehow, I got to be rather sorry for Felix Gordon. It seemed to me that he too was a victim of the War, in his own way. He had been a frank, straightforward adventurer whom the War had made respectable. The very qualities which had outlawed him transformed him into an honourable and valuable citizen. And he simply hadn't understood. As John Smith had said, he was fundamentally a rather stupid fellow. He couldn't adapt himself. He thought Stoneborough was another Quetzelango and its inhabitants fair-skinned editions of Quetze-

lango's very varied Presidents. Up to a point he was painfully right. But only up to a point.

He hadn't so much bribed Stoneborough as encouraged it to bribe him. There was the matter of his property in San Juan which needed only a little outside capital to become literally a goldmine. He and his own record were guarantee enough. (Hadn't the Government knighted him for War Service and wasn't he obviously a successful, self-made man?) It seemed there was already a small private company with Sir Felix as chairman and many noble-sounding Quetzelangians on the Board. True, the shares were not in the open market, but a few chosen friends might be "let in."

Actually, half Stoneborough was "let in."

Then came the scene on the market-place—disastrous to Sir Felix, since Stoneborough woke up with a moral sick-headache which it attributed to his fare—and soon afterwards the re-entry of Señor Marreno into Quetzelangian politics. There had been, I understand, a terrible meeting of Gordon's shareholders, who recognised one another with bitter astonishment, but there was nothing to be done. Legally, Sir Felix was out of reach. He had not given anyone money. He had not personally accepted any. Certainly, nobody had had anything in return. And, as he very reasonably argued, it was impossible to hold any individual responsible for Quetzelango's periodical upheavals. For that matter, wasn't he himself the chief sufferer? His property had fallen into the hands of rebels and unless the British Government intervened, which was improbable, there it was likely to remain. Shares in it were worth so much paper."

On the other hand, Sir Felix said, if the meeting passed a vote of confidence in him, he would pledge himself to an immediate journey to Quetzelango where he could treat

with Marreno for the best terms possible. The vote of confidence was passed by a sullen, helpless majority.

John Smith had had no part in all this. It was known that after my spectacular rescue he had been dismissed from Gordon's service. (For it was part of the latter's general misunderstanding of his fellow-citizens that he believed they had genuinely wanted to drown me and that his non-return at the polls was an expression of their legitimate disappointment.) Smith had remained in Stoneborough, however, removing himself and his scanty possessions from Gordon's princely house to his Aunt Lizzie's sweet-shop without a trace of discomfiture.

Then the tragedy. Felix Gordon who had weathered the bloodiest periods of Quetzelango's history, met a violent death in a peaceful English garden. At whose hands? Official suspicion pointed in one direction. On the night following that shareholders' meeting, John Smith had had a last interview with Gordon. Aghast servants testified to the bitterness and noisiness of its characters—at least as far as Gordon was concerned. Smith, it seemed, had spoken very quietly, offering two alternatives—either this or that—the listeners could not specify the actual terms. Whatever they were, Gordon had refused them violently and had even gone to the door with his visitor as though he couldn't trust him out of his sight, shouting denunciations. And John Smith had said nothing.

That night Gordon was to have gone up to town by the last train. He had been called earlier in the day by telegram. The servants actually saw him leave the house. He was found the next morning on the private footpath which led from his garden to the station. Medical evidence proved that death had taken place several hours before. As to the cause of death, he had been shot clean through the forehead apparently by his own revolver

which he held loosely in one outstretched hand. But suicide was practically ruled out. The ground all round the body was churned up by a prolonged and frightful struggle.

The servants had heard nothing. Their quarters were at the other side of the house and the footpath was a lonely stretch, fringed by trees which might easily have smothered even a revolver shot.

There were three chief witnesses. The first, a young newly joined constable, swore he had met John Smith close on midnight coming out of a sideroad which adjoined Gordon's house. He had been hatless, and under the lamplight his face had been distinctly visible. According to this witness, he wore a suit of grey tweeds and was calm and unhurried as any man might be who had gone for a late stroll. Still, a stroll at midnight is unusual and the young constable made a note of the encounter. On the other side was Aunt Lizzie and her little servant and shop assistant—Annie Roberts. Both swore that the prisoner had had supper at home and had gone to his room early and had stayed there. Aunt Lizzie had locked and barred the only exit, through the shop, with her own hands, and Ann Roberts whose cubby-hole adjoined the front door and who had been kept awake by toothache, swore that no one, however stealthily, could have got out without her knowledge. John Smith's room was at the top of the house, a forty-foot drop. The window looked out on to a side street. Even the Prosecution did not suggest it as an exit, much less a possible entry.

The two women swore that John Smith did not own a grey suit and no such thing was found in his possession. They held their ground stolidly. They were the witnesses for the Defence.

2

But there was no defence. That was his inevitable dramatic gesture. At the Police Court proceedings, so they told me, he had merely shrugged with good-humoured patience. At the Trial he spoke once, not to the Judge but to the Jury, turning swiftly to them with such a bearing of power and resoluteness that they had flinched as though before the flash of a drawn sword.

"I am not guilty."

Thereafter he did not speak again.

No counsel fought for him. There were able men all over the country ready to take up his case for the mere glory of figuring on his side. (For he drew even people who had never seen him.) But he refused their help. He was not insolent or even indifferent. His attitude was logical, to the point of foolhardiness. If he was innocent, then there was no need for him or anyone else to fight. It was the business of the Prosecution to prove a lie to be truth, if they could.

And gradually the consummate cleverness of that stand began to dawn on us all. The Prosecution, thrown out of its stride, grew angry, nagged, scolded, goaded, began to overstep the limits of legitimate insinuation and had to be pulled up short by the Judge himself. It flung itself, impotent and baffled, against that silence. It began to symbolise to the men and women who listened in tense judgment a malicious unfairness, an unsporting effort to weight the scales. Once, at least, after a cross-examination in which by hint and innuendo Counsel had had to implant damning suggestions to the Jury's mind, I saw that bewigged gentleman swing round upon the prisoner, hand on hip, his legal face made sneering by its very expressionlessness. One could almost hear the unuttered taunt.

"Now go into the witness-box, if you dare!"

And John Smith had made no sign. He stood there—he stood tirelessly throughout the trial—his eyes fixed on things beyond the Judge—great, absorbing things, one imagined. It was as though he had not heard or seen.

But now, looking back upon those three vivid days. I know that he was aware of every ebb and flow of feeling in that Court. I believe that for the first time in his life perhaps, he drew upon all the reserves of power that he possessed—joyfully, exulting, as he felt us one by one come under his mastery until that whole Court turned towards him, as towards a fierce, intoxicating light. Hardest of all, he must have fought when the witnesses gave their testimony. He did not look at them. But Aunt Lizzie, a frail, frightened old woman, grew brave and convincing under a cruel cross-examination, and Ann Roberts, slow of mind and speech, flashed out a spirited answer or two, and the young constable who had been glib and convinced at the preliminary proceedings began to waver and throw tell-tale glances at that impassive face.

There was the question of John Smith's life. Not even the Prosecution, do what it might, could stifle our knowledge of that almost unique War record. He had come from the ends of the earth to fight. He had risen from the ranks. He had been decorated with every order that a soldier dreams of. He had come through unwounded. (And that told for him, in some odd way, as though it were an instinctively accepted proof of the man's magnificent right to survival.) As to his life before the War—silence again. No one could speak of that with authority except himself. And he did not. Gordon might have spoken. It was known that Gordon and he had worked together in Quetzelango. But Gordon was dead.

Motive? His dismissal? The breaking of Gordon's promise of a post on the San Juan mine? Inadequate. The whole life and bearing of the man discounted an act of reckless anger. The quarrel? No one knew its cause. Nothing in Gordon's papers gave a clue to any serious reason for their rupture. There were many people in Stoneborough who had better reasons for vengeance. That fact did not transpire. There was the Counsel for the Defence to point to it. It was none the less known to us all.

And yet—and this was the strangest thing—I do not think that in the minds of any one of us John Smith was innocent. Perhaps that lay in his very nature. There are men and women with whom the word "innocency" can never be associated. Instinctively, we know that they are the very root of all action.

In those three days he looked towards us only twice—once—as I have described, at the very end, and the first time of all, when he came up from the cells and stood clear of the two warders, like a man throwing off a degrading touch, and faced the Court. He bowed gravely, with a subtle grace, to the Judge. Then he turned to where we sat. He saw me, and I thought a queer pleasure came into his face, and then Lisbeth—

That look seemed to me interminable—I felt that everyone in that Court must have seen what was in his eyes. He was a fighter in the arena, whose life hung on his courage, saluting openly the woman he loved.

And Lisbeth herself? I dared not even think of her. I was afraid.

3

People wondered to see her there. They were shocked even. This fair young girl in this yellow, airless Court,

the scene of so much pettifogging human error, hurt and worried them like a flower growing resolutely and innocently from a dung-heap. They thought, no doubt, that we ought to have kept her away, but then they did not know. To them she was still a child who in a wonderful and lovely way had kept the look of a child's unearthly innocence. They did not understand that upper lip and its gentle sternness.

Heaven knew, if I could have saved her from that time, I would have done so. If she had said then, "Marry me," I would have carried her off to the other side of the world. Though I was deadly weak still and my arm—what was left of it—hurt as though an animal with blunt fangs was gnawing at it day and night, I did plead with her. I pleaded for myself with a rough egoism that brought a puzzled look into her eyes as though a friend had become a stranger. And I was conscious, even in that moment, of a sad amusement. Hadn't she known I was human? a man who wanted things desperately? No, probably not. How should she know? I held back too much—in my romantic reverence of her—hidden too much. It hadn't been wise—it hadn't been even fair. Well, she had to know now what it meant to love her as I did.

"I've loved you since I was a child. I've wanted you as my wife since I've been a man. There never has been anyone else in my life but you. There never will be. But I've waited long enough—too long. That kind of thing can begin to fester. There can be no reason on earth why you shouldn't marry me—except one."

I caught a gleam then of that other Lisbeth—that Lisbeth who once she saw the truth and the right would follow it with a terrible fearlessness.

"What is that, Euan?"

"That you don't love me."

"But I do—I do."

It was a cry of distress—of protest against something too much, too strange for her. I held her to me with all the strength I had. I kissed her dead-white face with the desire of years. Brutal and beastly I seemed to myself a moment afterwards. For she lay against me with closed eyes like a dead child. But I would not let her go.

"Marry me—marry me, Lisbeth. If you love me, you must."

She raised herself. She stood back from me a little, not as though she wanted to escape, but so that we could look each other in the face. And her eyes made me think with a start of pain of other eyes. For they had that same ice-blue fire in them. Only they hid no mystery—except the mystery of great goodness.

"I can't, not now. When it's all over. I promise you. It would be cowardly—like running away."

I did not know clearly what she meant. It was significant that I did not ask her. Nor did I plead with her again. For the first time a definite fear was stirring in me. A man might come to life too late.

We sat the three days out in that dingy Court. She would not stay away an hour. She grew small and pale. Dr. Cobham, short-tempered with years, swore at both of us to no purpose.

"If he has to be there—we have to be there," she said proudly—"if we are his friends."

"And if he did murder this precious Gordon, eh?"

She flushed up.

"He is not a murderer, Doctor Cobham."

"Well, he may be convicted for all that. Perhaps you'd go to see him hung?"

"I would if I could. Yes, I would. It's cruel—that

a man should have to suffer like that alone. In the old days they let him go to the scaffold with crowds round him. And in these crowds there must have been friends and people who were sorry. That was civilised."

She was angry and white with pain—a little thing all nerves and steel. I saw Dr. Cobham stare and purse his lips.

"Well, our John Smith isn't altogether to be pitied," he said.

(Lisbeth and I never spoke of him. He lay between us like a narrow strip of unknown dangerous country.)

"Moral support," her father muttered, "he and that Jury have got to feel that the whole of Stoneborough's back of him. And if he did shoot that blackguard, so much the better."

It did not occur to any of us as strange that a man whose parentage was obscure, whose only known relative kept a mouldy little sweet-shop in our High Street should be counted one of us. Yet the War hadn't really done away with class distinction. It was the man himself with his air of belonging to all places—all time.

As that last day wore on, the Court became a place of horror to me. It seemed as though every ugly deed and shabby thought that had been dragged out shamefully into this unwholesome light had left a foulness behind which rose about us in a stifling, sickening miasm. Our faces had the drawn, yellow look of poisoned people. The scarlet robes of the Judge lost colour, merging into the murky background. We were closely packed. Many of us stood and had been standing since the daybreak and the air was hot with fatigue and a damped down excitement that passed like an electric current to the great crowd outside.

All day long the crowd had waited, staring at the

closed doors as if though at any moment they might be flung wide and a red-blooded tableau of a man fighting for life would be set before them. Strange and ominous they seemed to me, like a symptom of some profound human sickness. They wanted him to escape—but if he were sentenced they would crowd round the prison walls on the morning of his execution, sniffing the scent of human agony like hounds. And yet they were kind people—generous and tolerant.

They scarcely spoke. It rained and they did not move. Once when I fought my way out, faint for a breath of clean air, they questioned me curtly.

"How's it going?"

"Hasn't he said nothing yet?"

"What's his game?"

"Well, he's a rare plucked one anyway."

"You know that best, Sir."

And then they laughed uneasily, remembering that night when he had saved me from them. That was their first and last impression of him. A man of daring who did things they might do in a dream—why, even the Law with its inhuman engines couldn't awe him.

Towards the end of that last day I hardly listened. I heard, without understanding, the waspish periods of the Prosecution. And then the Judge and the Jury's faces peered up whitely—expressionlessly. His voice made a far-off murmur broken by a dry cough and the rustle of his notes.

"His duty—to put before them—direct them—as to the Law—theirs—to free their minds from prejudice—hearsay—Justice. Impartial justice. Varying degrees of crime—manslaughter—that too they would have to consider—Reliability of the witnesses—a difficult case—made more difficult by the Prisoner himself." And here

the sunken eyes lifted and rested on that baffling figure with a kind of querulous wonder. "There too—essential to put aside—personal feeling—the records of the two men—the dead and living—immaterial in the eyes of Justice. They were people of common-sense—it was in their hands."

Presently the stream trickled into silence. His voice lifted.

"Members of the Jury, you will retire to consider your verdict."

And they had risen from their places and after that strange moment of suspense filed out, leaving us like forgotten marrionettes in a dingy box.

4

It grew dark. Outside the night mist from the river closed down upon Stoneborough—a lovely mist like a silver mantle—which in this Court became a beggar's rag, dirty and foetid. We three did not speak at all. Lisbeth's hand still held mine, hard and cold and unconscious of me. Her father had sunk together; he looked liked some bird of prey hunched on its eerie, waiting, remorseless and silent for its quarry, only the eyes living. Up in the gallery behind the dock was the shuffle of tired bodies, a faint murmur as of a wind that is become a hurricane. It lasted half an hour. My heart counted the seconds in thick beats. I couldn't conjecture any more or reason with myself. (What, after all, was this man to any of us?) There were three pictures in my mind, that followed on one another like the pictures of a mad cinematograph. I saw the Judge in his retiring room. He had taken off his great wig and he was a little bald old man, rather agitated and tired. It wasn't

a very pleasant business any time to condemn other men to death—least of all when one was due to die oneself quite soon. His secretary, a young cub of a fellow with influence, helped him to a whisky and soda and he was holding the glass in a faintly trembling hand. Then came a murky sideroom unfurnished save for a long table and three mildewed engravings where the twelve listened to one another. They were pale and earnest, weighted down by their own terribleness and their own commonplaceness. Bryce, the foreman, loomed largely at their head. But it was Major Macrieth and Miss Jones who mattered—Miss Jones with her conviction of Human Sin and the Major who didn't care a damn for God or man so long as that blackguard Gordon had got his deserts from someone. Perhaps even now they cast their votes.

One or the other would hold out obstinately and I could see Bryce heave up his great shoulders.

"Look here—we've got to agree—can't make that fellow live through all this again."

There was the cell where John Smith waited. You went down the steep stairs from the dock and along a narrow stone-passage, worn with many feet. Two huge warders sat with him, watching him lest by some desperate act he should escape—I was sure that he was talking to them, pleasantly, exerting all his charm to raise them out of their bearish distress. I couldn't imagine him afraid. Perhaps Quetzelango cheated him too, telling him that there had always been a way out, hiding from him the nature of the implacable machine into whose hands he had fallen. And all the time he would have Lisbeth in his eyes, and he would be smiling a little—that curiously secretive and tender smile that was his greeting for her.

Lights sprang up. They floated in the yellow air like marsh-grass over foul water. A sigh that was half a groan sank into an appalled emptiness. A door opened. They had come back at last, shuffling into their pen, and we craned forward trying to read what must surely be written. But their faces were studiously expressionless. John Smith had come up out of the dark, the warders close at his heels like great bull dogs, and waited. His hands rested on the dock-rails, loose-clasped and tranquil. He seemed to be standing alone and high up above the ground-fog which enveloped us in a blurring mantle, so sharp-drawn that I had a poignant sense of unreality, as though I myself, and the people round me had disintegrated into drifting wraiths of mere emotion and instinct.

But he was hard and real, the substance of him close knit by an integral purpose. He was the one free man amongst us all because he wasn't afraid.

A sharp triple rap from the Usher's wand, like the knocking in a French theater before the curtain rises. The Judge came out of his door upon the dais. We stood up again with the rustling sound of wind among dead leaves. He was fumbling nervously with his red robes and I had one of these ghastly-comic twists of thought which pounce on us like imps to ridicule the big moments of our lives. I thought of a panic-stricken bridegroom fumbling for the ring. But it was the Black Cap of which he was making sure.

I felt Lisbeth let go my hand and stand alone.

The Foreman turned towards the Judge. The Judge bent his head. He was very deaf. He must have been afraid of making some terrible mistake.

He forgot Miss Jones and her two woman companions altogether.

"Well, gentlemen?"

"Not guilty, my Lord."

We were on our feet simultaneously. The Judge receded, dwindled. He had no power now. We were like people struggling out of a nightmare—making queer strangled sounds that exploded an instant later—miraculously—beyond the walls of the Court into a dull roar of triumph. There was a man near me crying openly—stammering—waving—fighting for coherent expression as though he himself had escaped death. The Judge made fretful gestures. He was almost inaudible.

"A disgrace. He would have the Court cleared."

Then later, more clearly and for the first time with the genuine feeling of a man: "a verdict in which I heartily concur—a relief to set at liberty a brave and honourable soldier whose fellow-citizens have cleared him from the suspicion of a hideous crime."

It was over. The Prosecuting Counsel gathered up his papers with a sudden air of bored detachment. The relentless pursuit had been nothing more, after all, than a piece of habitual play-acting. There was no reason why he and the late prisoner should not dine together in perfect amity.

People were surging over the barriers. I saw Macrieth hold up his hand to John Smith. He did not take it. He seemed not to see it, but to be still intent on his own vision. A Warder touched him on the arm—not authoritatively now but deferentially as one might remind a gentleman of some lapse into forgetfulness. But he did not move.

"My Lord, I have a statement to make."

He was speaking at last. His voice, rather high-pitched and metallic struck us into silence. We hung towards him—suspended—fascinated. The Judge himself, half-way towards the door, turned back.

"My Lord, I killed Felix Gordon. The witnesses spoke the truth as far as they knew it. There are many ways of leaving and re-entering a house to a man who is active and has a steady head. I killed him fairly. My reasons I shall give, in full and at the right time and to those whom they concern. He had double-crossed us all. I knew and had proof, but he had kept himself out of reach of the Law. I had worked for him. I was responsible to my friends and fellow-citizens whom he had ruined. I offered him the choice of making restitution or of fighting me for his life. He chose to fight. He was armed and I was not, and he knew it. And so I killed him."

He waited a moment. He had a compelling dignity which saved him from the taint of melodrama. He added in a low tone:

"I do not make this statement out of any desire for sensation, but because my Church demands a public acknowledgment of my action before she can absolve me. That's all."

He turned, motioning the two Warders on one side, and passed out between them into the open Court.

5

They carried him shoulder high through the market-place. We saw him for a moment riding the heads of that crowd and though he smiled a little it was without either exultation or relief. One would have said that he had done with the whole incident and that his mind was already working in the future.

We made our own way home with difficulty, pushing the Colonel's chair—for he was too lame now to walk more than a few steps—through side streets where strag-

glers stopped us to ask, "Is it true?" and to exclaim, "Well, upon my word, did you ever hear the like of it!" with a half-amused, half-shocked grimace as though tickled at the thought that a man might play such hanky-panky with our solemn English law. And the Colonel nodded and stammered, "Yes, by God—you can't try a man twice in this country. He's safe—and I'm damn glad."

Presently, Lisbeth and I were alone in his library. The Colonel himself, like a child that has torn its emotions to tatters, had been got to bed, and I had waited for her, pacing the dimly lit room and touching the little things that belonged to her as though there were magic in them. At last she came. We looked at one another. We had too much to say. There seemed no beginning. All the way here we had not spoken and now our silence lingered on like a hateful, baffling intruder. She came and stood opposite me by the fire, gazing down into the glow, her red-gold head resting on her hand in a pose so poignantly familiar, so dear, that almost my heart rose to my lips. I felt that in another moment I might find things to say to her that would release us both. And then—I suppose physical pain and weariness, however much one disregards them, secretly undermine a man's self-control—his very judgment. I laughed. The sound of that laugh was detestable. I saw her start a little. My heart sickened. I had checked and thwarted that splendid impulse and now I could only blunder from bad to worse, like a frightened fool. Her eyes rested on me and I felt their dangerous steadiness. I plunged headlong.

"I'm sorry. Only I've just seen the funny side—there is one to most things. There were we—stiff with the horror and tragedy of it all—and he must have been

laughing up his sleeve at us—at everybody, at the Law and the Judge, at dear old Father McGroarty himself. I can guess what McGroarty said, 'My son, there can be no forgiveness without public acknowledgement of your act.' Well, he has acknowledged it—handsomely. And what on earth will McGroarty do when next Smith goes to confession? Laugh too—I suppose."

I could see myself, a dark thick-set fellow, maimed a little in mind and body, a stranger to both of us. She asked in a low voice:

"Do you think of him as a common murderer, Euan?"

"Not a common one, Heaven knows. But he's killed a man. You can't get away from that."

"Is killing always murder? You killed men in the War. And he killed people too and was decorated for it. he killed men in Quetzelango. He told us about it. You didn't think of him as a murderer then."

"Surely there's all the difference in the world," I retorted "a difference of motive anyway. I didn't kill Germans for my own sake. Nor did he—at least—I suppose not. In Quetzelango there doesn't seem to be any law except jungle-law."

She answered me swiftly.

"And he didn't kill Gordon either for his own sake. And our law isn't of any use. It doesn't punish bad men who ruined people who trusted them. And he did give Gordon a chance and risked his own life."

"I don't believe he's ever risked anything. He's always known what he could do—" That was a flash of inspiration. I broke off only to add with a wretched superiority I wasn't feeling, "but you're talking nonsense, Lisbeth—tilting at the whole of our civilisation."

"Perhaps our civilisation is nonsense too," she said.

"Perhaps it is—but it's all we've got. A lot of us

thought enough of it to die for it." (We were both of us angry now like people who speak a different language and blunder from one piteous error into another.) "People like Smith try to wreck it, but there's still something of it left—respect for life. We've no right, as individuals, to judge each other to death, as he did. Heaven knows it's taken us long enough to get hold of that much. If that goes—everything goes. We'll topple back into the Stone Age."

"If civilisation means that," she said, "why did you kill each other for it? You respect only life when it suits you. I know—I feel that there are bigger things than life and that a man who takes it may be doing the greatest thing of all."

The lower part of her face was in the light. The upper lip, that somehow still kept its sweetness, was as inflexible as iron. Once perhaps, I thought wryly, some ancestor of hers, as gentle, as compassionate, might have burnt heretics for their souls' good. But all that didn't matter now. An immeasurable laming sadness had laid itself on me. By some subconscious road, running beneath all this fierce youthful dogmatizing, I had been brought up sharp against a truth, I would have given a world to have escaped from. But it was too late.

"Lisbeth—you'd justify anything he did."

There it was—dragged into the open. Our eyes met and into hers leapt a distress that made me almost forget my own. The blood had rushed in a dark flood over her face and neck and now receded as swiftly, leaving her very pale. Her voice was firm—rather desperately firm.

"That's not true. I'm only trying to be fair. What do you want me to do—what do you want me to think?"

"Dear, I can't dictate to you. I wouldn't if I could. Besides—I don't know what I think myself."

"Don't you want me to see him again? I won't if that would make you happy." (That sudden docility was piteous. It hurt me like the surrender of a naturally proud and independent spirit.)

"But I can't pretend."

I shook my head.

"I don't want you to. I'm not so stupid as all that. You've got to judge things for yourself—just as I have. What's the use of anything to me if you're not free and happy." I thought that she was going to lay her head on mine and I moved away into the shadow, for just then I couldn't have borne her touch. I should have been ashamed to show how weak I was.

"Nothing else matters."

I thought: 'What matters is that you love this man,' but if I had said the words aloud she might have answered 'yes,' for she would tell the truth, and then I couldn't have dreamed my dreams any more. I should have gone away—not kissed her again—lost everything that had been the colour and fire of my life. I was too big a coward.

"Don't let's talk of him, Lisbeth. After all, what does he matter to us? He's a bird of passage—an adventurer. In a few weeks he'll be off to the other ends of the earth. We'll have peace again."

I heard her sigh—a tired-out sigh—and then the click of the gate and sharp quick steps on the gravel path. He was coming. I knew—and I knew too that she had caught her breath and that her hand had gone to her breast in that remembered gesture of wonder. Even as I turned he was there in the open doorway—in the glow of the firelight.

They faced one another. And I had a brief prophetic vision of these two. It came like a flash of lightning and left me in greater darkness, but I was to remember it. They did belong to one another. Even physically there was an affinity between them—some rare quality, aerial and clear, like sunlight on an Italian hillside. Without moving they seemed to come together. And yet it wasn't a fusion of component elements—rather the impact of opposed forces, mutually attractive, terribly and inevitably drawn to a collision. Above my love and pain was my fear for her.

He was dishevelled and breathing quickly. He held out grimy hands that were bloody and torn as though by a sharp instrument. He laughed under his breath. But there was nothing youthful in that passionate haste. He came to her like a man, cool and resolute, out of the thick of action.

"They wouldn't have let me go," he said, "so I got into the house and escaped them by the old way—as I used to escape when I was a boy. There's a pipe three yards from my window. I used to swing myself along to it by the gutter easy enough—though I'm heavier and the gutter crazier than we were. I'll show you one day—you and Sergeant Baxter who swore only a monkey could try it and survive." He broke off—still without moving it seemed to me that he laid hold of her and held her fast and she was trembling. I heard the challenge in his low voice, "Well—Lisbeth?"

And then—he hadn't seen me. He wouldn't have seen me if I'd stood full across his path. I even brushed against him and he didn't know. I couldn't have stayed there. I couldn't have borne it. It wasn't tolerable. I was stifled and overpowered by that quiet terrible vio-

lence. I was glad to be out in the grey mist, even knowing that I had lost her.

6

I don't know where I went that night. I wandered like someone distraught wherever I was sure of being alone. But indeed at night-time round Stoneborough there isn't any real solitude. I think the very earth is made up of the living dust of the people who fought and toiled and dreamed here, and the sounds of water and the wind in the willow-trees are their voices, far-off, indistinguishable, yet deeply familiar. Gradually, in their midst, one loses all sense of loneliness—of pitiable finiteness. One becomes a part of eternity, of the races ageless, loving and suffering. So at last a kind of fugitive peace came to me and I turned homewards by the river. And there I met him. He sauntered towards me, singing to himself. It was as though one of those distant voices had torn off the muffling centuries and become distinguishable. Within a pace of one another we both stopped. The encounter seemed to be inevitable and final. A thin grey river mist hung between us, like a silent curious witness, blurring our faces, separating us by a kind of unearthly remoteness. And I think it was that feeling of our unreality that made it possible for us to speak as we did—without passion or resentment. I, at least, was subdued with weariness and a sense of some vaster issue, beyond ourselves.

"I've been looking for you," he said gently.

"Why should you expect to find me here?" I asked.

"I don't know—it's the place I should have come to—on such a night." He motioned with his hand and I turned about. The winter's moon had just risen above

the great plain and the mist behind us had become a luminous white sea out of which Old Stoneborough lifted a black stateliness. In the day-time the walls were shattered and overgrown. Night restored and magnified them. It is strange how the created thing can at last outmatch the creator. I thought—perhaps my companion was thinking too—of the men who had sweated and agonized to build these walls and of these others who had come riding along this path and looked up to them as to a place of sanctuary. They encompassed us—but they were shadows. Old Stoneborough persisted—a stark reality. It had thrust its roots deeper and deeper into the soil. It had a strange dark life of its own.

"It looked like that a thousand years ago," John Smith murmured, "only I suppose there would have been lights in the windows."

"Hardly. It must have been frightfully cold. They would hang tapestries against the night air. Besides, there would be enemies on the watch."

"Yes." His voice cleared. It was like a bright sword gently drawn from its sheaths. "And what a place to defend! Even now you couldn't take it by direct assault. They were great men, those ancestors of ours, Fitzroy."

I turned with him. Old Stoneborough seemed to go before us, like a giant on guard, barring the road. Smith walked with his hands in his pockets, easily, freely. I tried to remember that this morning he had been a prisoner, hanging between life and death. But the thing baulked my imagination. He was without hat or overcoat, but the damp cold seemed not to touch him. I wondered if, believing himself invulnerable he had become invulnerable.

"Don't you want to go back there, Fitzroy?"

"Gordon asked me the same question. No, either I've

outgrown it or I'm too small for it. I don't know which. It's not my home."

"Where is your home?"

"Goodness knows."

"I mean to buy it one of these days. Will you mind?"

"No. I don't think so."

"That might seem strange to anyone else—but not to me. Has it ever occurred to you that we might belong to one another in a kind of way? I can imagine that there were handsome women in that charcoaler's hut of ours in the forest and that your men took what they wanted in those days."

I wondered if he were taunting me, but his voice was brooding and touched with an odd warmth as though the conjecture pleased him. And I remembered the portrait of that first Sir Euan.

"Of course—it's possible."

"I almost believe it. I don't see otherwise why I should always drift back here. But I'd like to prove it. And by the Lord, it would please that jolly old gambling aunt of yours."

I smiled at that. He could be amazingly naive—like a child. It was hard to tell why he did not seem ridiculous. "You know, *she* wanted the place back, if you didn't—by hook or crook. And Gordon was the crook all right. An amazing fellow! What did it all amount to? A few thousand pounds. A mere sprat in his net. But he couldn't resist the fun of cheating even little people."

"I suppose he meant to cheat them? You're so sure?"

"I knew. He didn't even bother to deny it. He and Marreno were hand in glove. I don't say that if Stoneborough had elected him he mightn't have given them the benefit for a time. But he was getting sick of respecta-

bility. He wanted to go back to Quetzelango where he didn't have to pretend anything, and stay there. If he had managed a get-away, that would have been the end of San Juan as far as Stoneborough was concerned. Marreno would have confiscated the place lock, stock, and barrel, and Sir Felix Gordon would have vanished, but behind the scenes—" He broke off with a laugh. "You know I was really sorry to kill him. We had had wonderful times together. But there was no other way. I told him so, but he thought he was too strong. He went armed always. He meant to shoot on sight, but he wasn't quick enough. Being respectable so long he had grown fat and slow—"

He fell silent. I caught a glimpse of his face—of the fine-drawn almost delicate features, that were set now in a kind of alert composure. I knew that he was revisualizing that struggle, following it step by step with the cool detachment of a judge. In some mysterious way he made me see how it had all happened. I knew for instance that there had been scarcely a sound—just the shuffle of their feet, their smothered breathing, that final shot. These two had turned a quiet English garden into a corner of the jungle. No argument—no pleading. The ultimatum had been given and rejected. From the moment that Gordon had realised that he had drawn too late, he realised also that it was all over with him. He and his opponent had learnt their fighting where quarter was unknown, and it would never have occurred to him, rather dull-witted as he was at bottom, that he had any resource but in himself. Still he had died game. I guessed that too. He had looked into the slowly, ruthlessly descending muzzle of his own weapon without flinching.

John Smith pointed casually.

"By the way, that's where I threw in the famous grey tweed suit our bumpkin Constable was so set about. I'll tell Baxter. He might like to drag the river. But it's deep here and runs fast."

He had cast a kind of enchantment over me so that the killing of Felix Gordon had seemed a natural and inevitable act. But at that touch of far-seeing deliberation a dozen questions forced themselves on me. He had risked his life. That was true enough. But from what motive? Indignation? To save what could be saved for Stoneborough? Or had he known that Gordon was headed for disaster and by a series of incredibly bold moves pulled himself out of the ruins to a stronger position? Even that spectacularly generous rescue on the market-place—hadn't there been an element of cool calculation in that too? And yet there was that rare simplicity, that singleness of mind and purpose that made it hard to suspect a calculating treachery in him.

"Well, you've snapped your fingers at law and order pretty successfully," I said at last. "But if you take my advice you'll get out of here. They may get you on a technicality. Besides that, people have a way of waking up with cool heads."

"I *am* going. Back to Quetzelango. The shareholders will send me. I'm the only one who can pull the fat out of the fire for them. Marreno and I know one another—"

"Too well perhaps."

"Enough to come to terms. I can be of use to him too. One doesn't bear rancour out there. One sells one's support according to the needs of the moment. It's a wonderful life—" He drew his breath deeply like someone who has come out of a confined room into clean, free air. "Yes—I'm going. But I'm not going alone."

We had been walking more slowly and now we stopped altogether and faced one another. This was what really mattered between us. "You and I are up against it Fitzroy," he said.

I heard the exultancy of his voice—the friendly exultancy. He thought that he had fought and beaten me and that queer mocking spirit in him watched alertly for my answering gesture of pain or anger. He did not understand that for the moment I had forgotten him. Lisbeth. Life without her. An eternity of living. What was it Swinburne said? I remembered Lisbeth reading something aloud to a shy black-browed boy—who didn't really understand, so splendid and colourful life seemed to him then. "Even the weariest river"—(the swirl of water at our feet made me remember). Yes that was true at any rate. But life, that was like a breath under the stars, would seem a long business when the grey light woke me tomorrow to the loss of her. Years of monotonously reiterated effort, with everything that I had learnt of beauty through love of her turned to pain. I suppose I stood there stockily, phlegmatic-looking enough. I knew I heard my own steady voice with amazement. I felt that I was bleeding secretly to death.

"You mean that Lisbeth is to marry you?"

"I've asked her to go with me. Her father wishes it. And she loves me. You know that. You're not a fool."

"I know she loves me too."

"Oh yes—in a way—a child's way. You grew up together. A merciful thing for you both you didn't marry. She belongs to me. I've never forgotten her. I meant to come back. She didn't forget either. She waited. It was settled between us seven years ago—up there."

"Well—what am I to say?"

He stared at me. I baffled him too.

"Good God—how should I know?"

"I think you expect me to fight you. Lisbeth isn't to be fought over. She's proud—and she's quite free."

My eyes had grown accustomed to the half-light. I saw the lines of his face and something that I had never seen there—a fleeting look of amazed and arrogant perplexity.

"You've got to set her free, Fitzroy."

Then I knew. And I had a moment of triumph in her. So she had stood fast. In the teeth of a torrential passion she had kept faith. He had met her and been defeated.

"So she refused."

He made a movement of fierce impatience.

"I told you she was not a modern woman. She has old-fashioned notions. So long as you've got her word she'll stick to you. Oh, it's a mere form—a woman's love of ceremony."

I could afford to let him say that for I knew he spoke out of a rare sense of humiliation.

"And now you're asking me to cut my own throat?"

"Humbug, Fitzroy. You've got to make place. You can't help yourself. You want her happiness, don't you?"

"Do you?"

He walked on.

"She will be happy with me."

"You're sure of that?"

"I love her," he repeated grandly and simply.

"You've loved other women."

"I've lived with them." He tossed them aside with a gesture as curt and brutal as his words. "I've only loved once. You think you've been constant, Fitzroy. You have to have inconstant blood like mine to know what constancy means. Things that I've done—physical things—they were outside me—I've had a strange, diffi-

cult life that you couldn't begin to understand—but there's a part of me—here." He laid his clenched hand on his breast and I heard his voice darken and break: "which had never been touched except by her. She has been the flag from the mast-head—the shrine—the dream behind everything that I have done."

The terrific sincerity of him checked the bitter question: "Did you kill Gordon for her sake?" And, indeed, it was a needless question. I knew that when he had wrenched himself free of those dead hands he had given her the victory.

"God knows what manner of man you really are," I said. "I only know what Lisbeth is. And she's fragile at heart. She'll have no peace with you."

"She doesn't want peace. No one does," He nodded towards Stoneborough's quiet lights. "They think they do, but they don't. It's risk and excitement and power we want. Lisbeth too. By God, Fitzroy, I'll give her a kingdom yet—she shall have all the jewels that man ever sweated and died to bring out of the earth—she and I will make a new dynasty of kings." It should have sounded mad-laughable. My little Lisbeth with his jewels and his fantastic kingdoms! And yet there was a grandeur in that extravagant outpouring which moved me like an echo of an old dream. Kingdoms and jewels and danger. That was a real offering—not safety, not peace.

He said suddenly—and with unaffected feeling:

"I can't go on without her."

"Isn't that what really matters?"

"All that matters to me."

I stopped. This was to no purpose. We were struggling over something that was already lost to me. It was almost indecent. There was nothing in him to

which I could appeal. The naked simplicity of his passion over-rode me. It lent dignity to what might have been a grotesque egotism. He did love her. And I was at the end of my endurance.

"Of course—she is free."

I heard a smothered sound of relief. Not that he had really been afraid. But a fretting unaccustomed struggle had been averted.

"How you must hate me."

"I think I have done with hating."

"You're a strange fellow. I've always liked you and rather wished I didn't. And now——" His eyes widened a little as though he saw me more clearly. There was that one thing between us from the beginning to the end—our love for her. I felt like a living torch, burnt with pain—and he knew. "I'm awfully sorry for you."

Then I had one of those strange flashes of vision—too vague to be formulated, but thrusting the heart through with foreknowledge.

"As I'm for you," I said.

After a moment I turned and went on my way alone.

7

The next day Lisbeth and I had it out together and I told her that she was free. In a way I was more at peace than I had been for a long time. When a man has resigned himself to his Fate, he has risen above it, and I can think of that good-bye without shame. She on her side had done with struggling. She faced the truth, as I knew she would, with an unflinching honesty. But its very brightness blinded her. She saw me, I think, through a kind of mist, and I was glad of it. I

did not want her to see me clearly. I was very quiet so as not to startle her from the dream in which she was living, and I knew my quietness deceived her. But it is easy to deceive people in love, so long as the deception leads them towards the only end that matters. At least, the old rasp and distress of our relationship had gone. I was not her lover any more. I was just Euan the playmate who would understand, even a miracle.

It is like a picture burnt into my mind—Lisbeth sitting there in the firelight, her slender hands holding her face as a vase holds a flower, telling me of that love. It was all as strange and rare as a fairy-tale and she might well have been its Princess, a golden figure not quite of this world and yet so lovably human that I dared not look at her. She had known from the moment that the shabby scarce-crow boy had kissed her—known and yet not believed. She had tried to put the memory out of her mind as something absurd and fantastic, but the kiss had been like a pledge, given with a royal carelessness, "I shall come back for you." And sometimes she had wanted desperately to marry me and make an end of the dream, sometimes she knew that she couldn't, and during the trial she had been able to think of nothing but his safety. To have married me then, she felt, would have been a blow in his face and an act of desperate cowardice.

"But I would marry you, Euan," she said. "I do love you. Differently. And I want you to be happy."

I suppose all down the ages women have said that to the men who have loved them vainly. It is spoken out of their great pity and their hatred and understanding of pain in others, but it is a little cruel. It is even to a man who loves as I do, a kind of insult to the one thing left him—his pride in his own love. And yet I had to make the time-honoured gesture.

"We've been saved from the worst sorrow, Lisbeth. I shall be all right."

She sighed.

"I sha'n't be really happy until I know you love someone else."

I shook my head and smiled at her. I hope it was a successful smile and lent the truth a gay and gallant dress.

"You'll have to be happy before that. I'm an obstinate fellow and you're a bad habit. If ever you see me again—years and years hence—you'll have to say to yourself, 'that man loves me—madly, like a boy.' But it mustn't worry you. It's rather glorious, you know, to have loved only one woman. It'll make me feel that I've been a success after all."

Perhaps she didn't believe it then—didn't want to. It might easily have sounded a pretty rounding-off. At least, she was so young, so ignorant, so desperately in love herself that when we said good-bye at last she put her hands on my shoulders and lifted her face for me to kiss.

And I did kiss her—very gently.

It was almost dark in the low raftered shadowy room. She couldn't have known.

The rest of that evening is vague to me. . . . I spent it with Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious, and we talked of the trial and John Smith and what would happen to all the ruined people of Stoneborough. We did amazing sums on paper and for about the hundredth time they tried to refuse my help and looked puzzled and a little hurt—for a Victorian respect for property still clung to them—when I said that I didn't want my money and that it was a sort of curse.

"But Lisbeth," Aunt Geraldine began.

The very sound of that name was like a shrewd knife-thrust into a half-numbed body and the merciful haze that hid my future from me rolled away, leaving an avenue of empty years. I heard myself telling these two in a voice that sounded unnaturally loud and their faces that had been vague and featureless seemed to grow large and come very close to me, full of compassion.

And suddenly Miss Cornelious brought her fist down on the table so that that antiquity groaned and quivered.

"By God," she said. "I wish they'd hung him."

But I laughed at her.

"Why, he's one of your own pet pirates, Corny!"

"I'd hang him all the same," she muttered.

I went back to my work. I heard that Lisbeth and John Smith were married—almost at once, for, just as he had predicted, he had been appointed by the San Juan shareholders to represent them in Quetzelango—but I would not play the conventional part of the resigned magnanimous lover. I neither attended a ceremony that would have been gall and death to me nor sent a word to her. It was much better that she should forget me.

But one thing I did do. I knew when these two were sailing and went down to Liverpool to watch their boat put out. I did not try to see her, even secretly, but stood on the outskirts of the embarking crowd, and in a kind of dream lived over all our youth together. The War had made life seem very long. I could hardly believe that I was still a young man and that Lisbeth was going away from me—that soon there would be seas between us.

At the last, by a strange chance, we saw one another. The gangways had been withdrawn, the ship was moving slowly and along her sides, passengers, waving and shouting crowded to take their last look at England. And

she was there—I think alone—I saw no one else. And across that slowly widening gulf our eyes met.

Her lips parted. But I cannot tell what I saw in her face—sadness, wonder, realization for the first time of what she meant to me—and more than that, the look of a fairy-tale child who has become a human woman with a new vision, an understanding as yet bewildered, but wrought already with pain.

And yet I knew too that she would not, could not, have turned back.

And so we watched one another till we could see one another no more, and I turned blindly away, blundering into people, muttering to myself.

"If only she is happy. Let her be happy and I won't care."

Like a child bargaining with a huckstering, half-believed-in God.

PART II

PART II

I

1

THE crane swung me off the deck like a head of cattle and deposited me on the floor of the lighter, rolling oilily in wait under the *Arizona's* rusty flank. Two other passengers had been similarly unloaded. There was Albert Finney from West Ham, London, and a large unshaved ruffian with a pronounced German accent whom for no reason that I could discover we called the Baron. Both had been drunk when they came on at San Diego, and they were drunk now. They lay limp and subdued between bales of cargo—for neat whisky and the insidious sway of the lighter were combining to be disastrous—and had no answer for the car-tender's facetious prophesies as to their immediate future. Captain Otto, stout and pink-faced, watched from the taff-rails and flicked cigar ash over us by way of benediction.

"And remember," he adjured cynically, "when any one is rude to you, Sir Euan, joost ring up ze British Consul."

Two half-cast Indians sheered off and we came out from under the *Arizona's* shadow and began to lumber heavily shorewards. For five weeks I had wrestled with men and tides and time-tables—bribed and threatened my way from stage to stage towards this place until desire had invested it with an impossible importance. After all, San Roberto was just an open roadstead with a native

village and a rickety iron pier stretching beyond the reach of the surf that had thundered in my ears all night. A badly handled boat, missing the pier steps was doomed to be smashed to match-wood, and what the breakers did not batter out of recognition the sharks would finish. So Captain Otto had assured us, adding with a heavy Teutonic humour:

"Zem natives careless fellows."

To be first off had become a kind of habit. I stood forward in the prow of our clumsy craft and watched the lifting shore line with a tense impatience. It seemed almost familiar to me, as a dream country seems familiar. Last night, as we came to anchor under the blazing stars, I had seen it, encircled by a white band of foam like a plumed, crowned head of a dusky red-eyed god. And then in the early morning—for there had been no sleep for me that night—I had seen it rise out of the phosphorescent dark—an unearthly world over which the sun poured colours more ethereal than a fancy, rose upon sapphire, gold upon rose, until I had felt myself too gross —had wanted almost to turn away as from something unendurably beautiful. And between those hours of sunset and dawn there had been enchantment. The sea, that guarded the shore with its roaring batteries, lulled me gently. The ship was silent as a ghost. Somewhere in that velvet darkness Lisbeth lay asleep. She had been there too, perhaps, and had watched as I did, the night roll up its scroll and the silhouette of palms sharpen against the emerald light of morning. This Paradise was hers. For it seemed a Paradise in those hours. Reality had slipt away like the flying fish that leapt in showers of silver through the moonlight. I forgot why I had come.

But the spell was broken. A brutal sunlight stript San

Roberto of its vestments, colour by colour, leaving a dirty nakedness. The very water that ran beneath our bows, translucent as liquid sapphire, held a hint of some foul, rank life whose decay tainted the air and exuded from the thatched huts, tumbling between shore and jungle, like a pestilential breath. Beyond, welded by distance into a solid impassable barrier, the great Sierra Madre lifted a menacing shadow.

Finney buried his small freckled face in his hands.

"Oh, curse them movies," he said bitterly and apparently unreasonably. Then he laughed and, discovering a cigarette end behind his ear, sniffed it just to show there was some devil left in him. "I've 'ad my last drink," he added. "I takes my dying oath on that."

We blundered against the rusty pier steps. For a moment it seemed that we were going to shoot past them to destruction against the skeleton of iron girders, but a swarm of lean fluttering brown hands laid hold of our gunwales and amidst yells and execrations we were made fast. Then apathy descended again like a hot cloud. From the pier a Quetzelangan official, clad in what appeared to be the remnants of several European uniforms, had watched our disembarkation. Now as we came up level with him he saluted gravely and I saw his animal brown eyes rest on my empty sleeve with a glow of interest. He addressed the Baron. That gentleman, very dirty, still drunk, and very seasick somehow managed to convey the impression of being a man-of-the-world, at home in all places and under all circumstances. He could at least speak Spanish.

"The Commandante wants to know if you're a *soldado,*" he explained to me.

"I was one," I returned, "a very bad one. I'm a doctor now. Capacity fair."

The Baron translated solemnly. The Quetzelangan made me another little salute, tolerant and patronising.

"He says we shall need doctors, no doubt."

Another man had joined us. He was long and fair-skinned and very English. The spotless white clothes carried no visible sign of authority, but the drowsily buzzing swarm of native porters broke before him and the official's salute became impressive. The newcomer nodded to us. I noticed that he limped clumsily like a man with an artificial foot which he hasn't learnt to manage.

"My name's Anderson. Jefe Politico to this salubrious district. Got your Pasa Portes? Right. Give them to the Commandante who is the monkey-faced gentleman on my right. That's what he's not paid for doing. All I want is your names."

"Albert Finney."

The German bowed from the waist and kept his balance by what was no doubt a feat of long practise.

"Baron Karl von Eisen."

"Euan Fitzroy."

The man Anderson referred from me to a typed list.

"Don't seem to have your name."

"I hardly see how you could hope to have it."

"That's all you know. Where are you bound for?"

"San Juan."

"Then you're a friend of the General's?" I suppose I looked blank enough. "General John Smith," he added.

"No, I'm not going in that capacity. I know him. He wasn't a General in those days. I've got business with him."

"He didn't send for you."

"He doesn't know I'm coming."

"Where are you from?"

"England."

"You've come a mighty long way round."

"The quickest. There seems to be some sort of a hold-up on the Atlantic side."

A flicker of a smile went over the lean sun-withered face.

"That's so. You seem to have been in a hurry. Well, there's no hurry in these parts. Their blessed one-horse-power train went an hour ago. You'd have to wait till to-morrow anyhow. I'll telegraph to find out how badly you're needed."

"To the President?" I asked.

He lifted a quizzical eyebrow at me.

"No, not to the President," he said.

He turned away.

"You two are passed. There's accommodation at the Hotel Libertad. If you don't keep the drink out and the mosquitoes off, you'll have fever to-morrow. I'll look you up later."

He hesitated as though he were still not quite easy on my account and then with a curt nod limped off down the pier. We followed. The convoy of *carggadores* like a flight of sparrows fluttered about us, carrying our belongings, light stuff enough, yet seeming too much for their fleshless fever-consumed bodies. I believe I instinctively made some movement to relieve my particular victim, but the Baron waved me back firmly.

"Let zem alone, my vriend. Zey are used to it. Mustn't com—compromise—white man's dignity."

He himself remained imperturbably dignified. Indeed, I believe his absolute assurance that whatever figure he cut must be noble because he cut it, rescued our party from humiliation. Finney was frankly sick. I put my arm round him and we staggered along together under

that deadly sunlight. If he was disgusting, he was also slightly pathetic.

"If it'd been honest English beer, my Lord," he told me, "this would never 'ave 'appened."

Somehow we reached our Hotel Libertad—a shanty built Spanish fashion round an evil-smelling courtyard and consisting of a bar and a few guest rooms. The latter with their torn gauze windows and canvas beds whose dirty pillows were partially veiled under dubious looking hand towels offered small hope even of quiet. Finney and the Baron gravitated inevitably to the bar. I could hear them arguing with the extraordinary solemnity of the very drunk. I escaped out into the streets.

I don't know when it began to dawn on me that there was something queer about Porto Roberto. On the surface it was just a miserable native village, flea-bitten, mosquito-ravaged, encircled by fever-breeding swamps and jungle. But underneath there was a sort of activity. It didn't concern the real inhabitants. Probably, nothing had ever concerned them much. They were just pawns in someone else's game—pushed hither and thither till they had long since stopped asking 'why' or 'by what right?' —a dark sad-faced people with heaven knew how many conflicting strains of blood in their veins, but not a drop of hope.

"A Paradise," Captain Otto had said. "Your food grows under your hand. And clothes—well, you don't need any." But there was a misery here that made the slums from which I came seem splendid in their protesting ugliness. It gaped at you from the inch-deep sores of the over-burdened mules, from between the starting ribs of the mongrels desperately nosing amongst the offal that filled the gutters of the unpaved streets. It seemed to plead from the eyes of the ugly-gentle iguanas, tied

into grotesque and tortured attitudes beside the blowsy indifferent saleswomen.

I remember, as somehow significant, the flock of buzzards, obscene and watchful, who rose out of my path with a heavy-winged insolence into the moist and lifeless air. I heard them drop behind me. And they were there when I came back. Their pretence of fear was insolent. They and the filth they lived on had always had the power between them.

And yet there was that human activity too. Somewhere, I fancied at last that it emanated from the tall white-clad Anderson whom at the close of that stifling day I found counting over the extraordinary collection of crated goods which had formed the Baron's chief luggage and which now stood piled up by the railway track for to-morrow's train. He looked up at me. I gathered from his quick frown that I was still a problem. He said casually:

"No answer from San Juan yet. 'Fraid the General must be away on business."

"That's a pity."

"It is. No joke kicking one's heels in this bug-ridden spot."

"Well, I shall be off to-morrow."

"I'm afraid," he said, "you haven't got my meaning." He gave up his pretended casualness.

"Look here," he said. "I'm a fair judge of men and their ways by this time and I have a feeling that you've brought a bone to pick with someone in these parts. Now there are so many bones to be picked—and juicy ones at that—that another might cause trouble. I suggest to you that you rejoin the *Arizona*. She's going through the canal to New Orleans. It'll make a nice trip round for you."

"Since you know men so well," I said, "do you think I look like a man who travelled ten thousand miles in five weeks for nothing!"

He measured me frankly.

"No," he said. "Now I come to think of it—no."

He went back to his bales and I to my wanderings. I was jaded and restless. Night closed down suddenly but it brought no relief from the fœtid heat. Instead an evil stench raised itself and prowled the streets like a malignant footpad. The bar of the Libertad stifled with a crowd of half-castes, dicing and drinking, and amidst the clink of glasses and the babble of an unfamiliar tongue I caught Finney's voice, shrill with anger. If there was a quarrel they would drag me into it and I had a shrewd notion that nothing would please my friend Anderson better. I turned away. I went back to the shore, empty now save for two women, who wrapped in their wide-swinging petticoats, bathed in the surf, wordless and unlaughing. With their slow antic gestures they might have been priestesses dancing before an unknown god. Presently, they vanished, flitting noiselessly into the shadow of the jungle. It was as though their going had been a signal. An immemorial life stirred in its hiding place. Its advance guards, shrill-voiced and venomous mosquitoes, brushed past me fiercely. The surf-roar had become louder. Its blows sent a shudder through the sand. Behind me the jungle seemed to move —to come gliding down the sloping shore like a thick green tide, swarming with monstrous life. So strong was the impression that I almost turned to meet it—to save my throat from the clinging, winding fingers. A moon had risen. Perhaps it was my mood that made its beauty and the glittering road it paved across the sea unwholesome and repellant. Its face was large and white

and swollen—leprous looking. The surf threw up a phosphorescent image of itself like a formless spectre rising out of a charnel house.

I thought of cloudy English skies and the grey cold Atlantic swept by its clean winds and was torn by a fierce longing to escape from what lay before me. There rode the *Arizona* at anchor. It was like a long dark fish, swaying softly with the tide, its many eyes throwing warm signals across the water.

"Come home—get back to your work. You've no business here. You're the last man on earth for your errand. You know it. You'll break her heart and your own too."

A shadow came zigzagging against the white moving wall of surf. I recognised Finney by his very drunkenness. He was so forlornly, hopelessly drunk. He swayed hither and thither through the clogging, shifting sand and sang plaintively some ancient Cockney ballad that hadn't meant to be plaintive at all:

> I'm 'Enery the Eight I yam,
> 'Enery the Eight I yam, I yam.

He almost fell over me and let out a hoarse yell of horror as though he had stumbled over a corpse.

Then, recognising me, he collapsed.

"Gawd," he said, "that ague—what-you-call-it, is the devil. They're fighting mad over there. I came away. I don't 'old with such goings on. Getting a bit shirty myself to tell the truth. A fellow there—a greasy louse of a fellow—said you was a spy and the Baron says you wasn't—knew you since you was a boy—brought up together—'it 'it over the 'ead with a whisky bottle—very nearly trouble. But the Baron—'e 'as a way with 'im. A gen'leman—that's wot 'e is—'e mayn't look it—but a gen'leman."

He brooded. He had drunk himself past the state of being either quarrelsome or tearful. He saw visions. He was temporarily possessed of a sixth sense so that he knew that the rapscallion Teuton was a gentleman. He even knew my thoughts.

"You're right," he said, "absolutely right. It's a beastly sea. It's a loose woman, you take my word for it. And that green choked-up place they call a jungle—you'd expect that to be decent anyway—none of your stinking 'umans—but it's not—no, Sir. Not at all. There are things in that there jungle which if my wife were 'ere with me I'd say, 'Don't you look, Mary. It ain't fit for a respectable woman.'" He turned himself round to stare at me with an immense solemnity. "Got a wife, you know. Yes—a nice respectable body in West 'am. Yes, respectable myself once—" he hiccoughed, "before the War, you know."

"I know," I assented grimly.

I don't know why I should have been comforted by his presence. I was glad just to hear his voice. The very twang had an honest, kindly sound.

"That there bloody War," he reflected.

"I used to pray to Gawd, 'Get me out of this alive and I'll stay 'appy in West 'am all me days.' Swore it, I did. And I got out of it alive and 'ere I am. Wotcher make of that, Sir? Fact is, I couldn't stick it. Breakfast—dinner—tea—bed. Seeing the same old trousers waiting for you in the same old place where Mary would 'ang 'em, though I told 'er the sight of 'em made me sick. Same old thing every day of your blessed life—till you wondered wot it was all abaht." He wagged an impressive finger through the moonlight. "When a man's fighting for 'is life, 'e don't worry wot 'e's alive for; that comes afterwards."

He leant against me, his head on my shoulder like a coy girl, and I thought he had fallen asleep. But suddenly he sat up straight.

"Wot the 'ell am I doing 'ere, Cap'en?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Wot's anybody doing?"

"I know still less. No use worrying."

"That's right. No use. But it's 'ard to stop once you've got started. Only thing to do is to do something. Keep moving. That's wot I did. 'Opped it. Ship's steward to New York. But them movies, just a pack of lies like everything else. Propaganda. You'd think from them there was a 'old up and a free fight at every street corner. Not a bit of it. Same old grind. Breakfast, tea, and dinner, and lucky to get 'em. So when that one-eyed chap said to me, 'You look the right sort, 'ow about money and a scrap?' I said, 'I'm on.' And 'ere I am—Lieutenant in the noble Quetzal—something—or —other Army."

"A what?" I asked.

"Lieutenant. Yes, sir. And if you 'adn't lost your blessed arm I'd say you was a General. Queer, ain't it, 'ow Generals never lose anything—except battles. Oh, yes, there's a war coming on 'ere. Don't you tell no one I told you. But it's the truth. Then cases of the Baron's stuffed with munitions—you bet your boots. Why—I got a uniform myself somewhere—I'll show it you."

I was alert enough now.

"What do you want—fighting for a lot of foreigners?"

"Foreigners? 'E's no foreigner. Wot—Smith? Never 'eard of Smith? Gawd, wot were you doing in the Great War, daddy?" He laughed, "Smith's all right."

He stood up presently and stood swaying about me like a reed in the wind.

"Not that I cares much for the scenery, and that's the truth," he said. "Too many wriggly things in it. I'd better 'ave another of those little drinks before closing time or I'll get the fever. That's wot 'is Almightiness said, ain't it? 'When you feels shivvery like 'ave another drink.' Come on, General."

I did not answer his invitation, and he was actually set towards Nicaragua until I turned him round. Then he remembered his real business with me.

"Knew there was something I 'ad to tell you. If you wants to get to San Juan you'll 'ave to foot it. They don't mean to let you go by the train to-morrow. They don't fancy the look of you. Thought you'd like to know, Sir."

"Thank you," I said.

He saluted in mocking imitation of the Commandant's best manner.

"Not-at-all, Señor."

When he was set safely on his course I went back to my sandhill.

John Smith. I'd hardly thought of him—only of Lisbeth. By reason of the thing he had done he had dwindled to a mean, commonplace man whose evil might be irreparable, but whose self scarcely counted now.

Perhaps I had a touch of fever. Perhaps the light, which magnified the shadows of the palm trees to the columns of a huge fallen temple, magnified him too. Like a ruff and an old ballad, Aunt Geraldine had said—like the figure of a legend, dim yet gigantesque, he loomed up there behind me in that terrific fortress of mountains. I almost fancied I saw him, gazing from its battlements into the distance.

To-morrow, perhaps, I should meet and challenge him

—a drab, everyday fellow, maimed, and not much of a fighter at the best of times.

He would look at me with his quizzical smile.

"We're up against it, Fitzroy."

Only I doubted whether he would smile this time. He was on his own ground now. No light-hearted playing here. Besides he would read in my eyes that whatever my powerlessness, I meant mischief.

And then Lisbeth.

At the thought of her, involuntarily I covered my face.

My poor, my lovely unhappy sweetheart.

2

No need to say much of the three intervening years. To the real Euan Fitzroy they were quite empty.

People generalize cheerfully about love and time and the human heart. But the net of their generalizations is too wide. Small fry like myself slip through and make exceptions—not very lucky exceptions, perhaps, judged by the ordinary standard of happiness.

I worked hard, though. I had my workshop in a poor mining district and mended some fair examples of human wreckage, and finished off a few too, like the rest of my brethren. The best that I can say for myself is that I did not grow rich over it.

In a way life had become a very simple business for me. I knew that I wasn't clever and I put aside the tormenting questions which men were asking themselves at the end of the War. That momentary revelation of the market-place was answer enough. Not to hate—to have compassion. I clung to that scrap of dogma tenaciously —sometimes with teeth set and eyes shut. For it was not always easy. I remember in particular that night

Richards came to my dispensary with his smashed hand. He was a great lout who thrashed his wife as regularly on Saturday night as he got drunk. She had come with him now—a slip of a woman, half-starved, her lip bleeding and her pinched white face oddly shapeless-looking as though permanently disfigured by tears and blows.

"It was that there lamp," she explained pitifully—" 'e would throw it at me; I said, 'It ain't safe, Jim,' but when 'e's like that 'e won't listen. And the nasty thing busted in 'is 'and."

He sat crouched by my table, sullen and heavy like a stupid bulldog. It was certainly an ugly business. The broken glass had slashed the flesh to ribbons and its fragments were lodged deep in the wounds. I remember looking down at the bullet skull with the low receding forehead and thinking, "Well, it's your turn now," with a sort of thirsty satisfaction.

"You'll give 'im a whiff of something—something to make it easy like, won't you, doctor?"

At the same moment he lifted his eyes to mine—round, hazel eyes they were, tormented and baffled, and I seemed to be looking down through them into a jungle in which his poor deformed soul wrestled with God knew what instincts, what desires, what blind despair of himself and life. I turned to her. Her face pleaded for him. After all she was beautiful. In her own way she held the truth and could never be quite so beaten and broken as he was.

"Of course," I said.

I went back to Stoneborough as often as I could. My aunt, now that the secret objective of her life had gone, was slipping fast into old age and to my love was added a sense of guilt. I knew that I had failed her. Yet I knew too that my coming made them happy. It brought

back the old suave dignified days for us three to sit together in the faded drawing-room and gossip peacefully (and sometimes scandalously) about our neighbours. Or I told them of my work and they would pretend gallantly that it was worthy of the last Fitzroy.

Of Lisbeth I only heard indirectly. The San Juan mine shares had become a marketable speculation. At any moment big developments might be expected. John Smith had sent over for recruits—mining experts and, indeed, anyone who was sound in wind and limb and wanted to take a shot at fortune. Our streets had been swept clean of our sullen, brooding young men.

Colonel Gay was a helpless cripple now. I did not go to see him. I knew that he did not want to see me.

But at the end of those three years he wrote and on the same evening that I received his letter John Smith's wife walked into my dispensary.

3

I knew at once. I had the letter in my hand—it was a terrible letter—scarcely legible. Each sentence might have been torn out bleeding from that violent old heart. He had forgotten that he hated me. I was the one man on earth whom he could turn to in his frantic helplessness. I loved Lisbeth.

As to John Smith's wife—she saw the letter too and nodded a careless understanding.

"He sent me here," she explained. "He said you and I could settle things."

She sat on the other side of my table, under the light. I wish I could describe her adequately. Quite obviously she was what we call a "bad woman" and would have been bad under the most favourable circumstances. It

was written all over her face. Turbulent, sensual, without principle, carrying riot and disorder with her like a retinue, that was Paula Smith (*geborene Schenke*) from first to last. And yet I have a slinking conviction that if it ever comes to a general settlement, Paula won't show up so badly compared to the average human being who never does anything that matters anyway. At least, she was large and vital and brave and recklessly extravagant —a compound which may not stand for either peace or respectability, but which seems to me nearer God than many of our orderly little virtues. Perhaps it is strange that I should write of her so tolerantly, seeing what she meant to Lisbeth, but she broke down my instinctive recoil from her as high wind blows away a mist.

She was beautiful in a large, blond, untidy fashion which might but for her temperament have developed into coarseness. But her temperament rode her like a fury. There was something wan and rather appealingly tired about her as though she would like to sit still and didn't know how it was done. The burning hazel eyes that met mine seemed to harbour a lurking tear and a lurking wink too.

After all it wasn't her fault.

"I'd haf turned up before now," she explained with a faint not unattractive accent, "but I haf been in prison —yes, three years. Passing bad money. As a matter of fact, I knew nozzing about it—nozzing whatefer. But George Ternel, he was a swine."

I took refuge in a desperately held incredulity. I didn't want her to see how badly hit I was. But from the first moment I hadn't a real doubt. More than that, I knew now that subconsciously I had always known— I had felt disaster loom like a black shapeless cloud on the horizon, waiting to blow up with the first wind. For

that matter, he made no secret of the wreckage he had left behind him. But he had been too sure that it was wreckage.

"It's some absurd mistake," I said—"natural enough, of course. There are John Smith's like pebbles on the beach."

She smiled good-humouredly.

"There is only von John Smith."

She took a paper from her bag and gave it me with what touched me as rather naive gesture of confidence. "What you call my marriage lines," she explained.

I stared at the document, seeing nothing but a blur of print and clerkly writing. I felt I had to give myself time. And yet time didn't help me. I simply stript the truth naked and what I saw blew my poor little life's principle to the four winds. I would have killed John Smith. A rage boiled up in me that was as primitive as a tiger's lust. It was only when I saw beyond him to Lisbeth that that loathly red fog about my brain seemed to dissolve. It was then he became little and insignificant. I had no more concern with him—only with her. How to shield her—how to stand between her and this horror? My mind seemed to run hither and thither like a trapped animal, seeking an escape.

"Better tell me the whole business," I said vaguely.

She shrugged her big shoulders.

"Why should I? I don't even know who you are—or what you're doing in this galère."

"I'm a friend."

"Whose friend? The little girl he's gone off with?"

She must have seen something come into my face that checked her. "Well," she said sullenly, "I married him—1914. What else?"

"You're not English."

"By marriage," she retorted.

"But before?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"You'd better answer them."

"I haf got a question to ask too," she intimated grimly.

"That'll come later. We'd better both put our cards down, don't you think?"

The idea seemed to amuse her back into a good humour.

"Very well. Yes, I'm a Hun. Singing in a Viennese operetta when the War broke out. I was in with a tough lot of Germans and they'd haf deported me all right if John Smith hadn't come along. We were friends, you understand. When he saw the fix I was in he said, 'Marry me and they won't touch you.' Well, I don't usually marry people. But I did that time. And he was right. There was such a mix-up in those days. They lost track of me."

"What did you want—staying on in this country?"

She turned on me with a flare of resentment.

"That's my affair."

"Were you—a spy?"

"Not then."

"Well?"

"You're a damned obstinate young man." She made a shy and sulky gesture. "Well, I had a pal in the German Hospital. I was finished with him—but he was dying—and I'd promised to see him through. You can shut up about that. It's not your affair. And you don't believe it anyhow."

"But I do," I said.

She looked at me quickly. From that moment I ceased to be an antagonist.

"Well, it's true. Stupid but true."

"And Smith. What about his motive?"

She smiled at that. A curious smile. It expressed so much—tenderness, compassion, admiration—and a kind of scorn.

"Did you know him, doctor?"

"Yes."

"Then you know he'd do things like that. Crazy things. He'd seem to risk everything. Marrying me, for instance. A Hun woman. And he meant to be a General. He said so. In those days he hadn't even joined up and he was poor too—my God, how poor. Another week and he'd haf been through his last pair of boots. *Aber —aber doch ein fesche Junge.*"

I knew a smattering of German, but even if I hadn't I should have read her face. Its haggardness was illuminated by an almost girlish look of remembering wonder at him. It made my heart contract. For I had seen that look before—transmuted by innocence—yet poignantly the same. It was as though he threw a spell over each different mind, calling up some image—some dream old as humanity itself.

"Well, we had our good times," she said.

"When did you see him last?"

"In Brussels. That was 1916."

I suppose I looked incredulous, for she laughed out with a sudden full-blooded gaiety. "At the Brasserie Bruzellaise—under the nose of General von Eichen. There'd been a German victory and we were all as drunk as lords. Except John Smith. He was just pretending —singing the 'Wacht am Rhein' with the r—rottenest accent."

For an amazing moment the picture swept Lisbeth herself out of my mind. I saw him, sitting there, with his mug of beer on the round marble table, playing with life and death as a conjuror juggles with his gay-coloured

balls. And under that reckless hilarity he had been as cold as ice, alert as a panther. I saw too, the woman opposite glow in her memory of that dangerous, splendid comradeship.

"He was in the Secret Service for a year," she explained "and he got them to 'deport' me. Easy enough. I was a German. I got a job at one of the cabarets in Brussels and when my pals were tight I'd get things out of them and slip them through the lines. How and why he came to Brussels, I don't know. He said it was to see me. But that wasn't true, of course. I didn't know for years after whether he got back. They arrested me the next morning. I'd haf been shot there and then—but there was a General—he'd been after me for weeks. For a price he'd get me off, he said. Na, I paid."

"So you were a spy—on your own people."

"Oh," she said scornfully, "I'd haf done worse than that for him. I did too. That General—well, I knew there were swine on this earth—but not that sort."

What she said seemed to alter her very appearance. Her wanness became a mask, covering unspeakable knowledge. I saw too, for the first time, how shabby she was. She had blinded me with her largeness—a kind of personal gorgeousness—but she was really down-and-out, a wreck kept afloat by sheer lust of living.

She seemed to read my thoughts.

"You'd think it'd be an economy and rest," she said with a wry twist of the full strong mouth, "being in prison. But it isn't."

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Money," she returned as briefly.

"That's why you went to Colonel Gay."

"Of course. He don't seem to haf anything, poor devil."

"So he sent you to me."

"Sir Euan Fitzroy sounded more hopeful," she admitted with a touch of her old cynicism. This was business now. She had put away her memories as a grown-up puts away a few childhood's toys, and was armed with a hard wisdom. "He wouldn't half sent me to you, if you hadn't a reason too for keeping me quiet," she added.

"It's blackmail."

"Of course."

"And useless. A thing like this can't be kept quiet. It'll come out sooner or later. And the later the more terrible it will be."

"For whom?"

"For the lady who believes—who has every right to believe that she is his wife."

She looked at me keenly.

"It won't come out if I hold my tongue and go away."

"You won't go away. You'll go back to him."

We both stood up. She had grown suddenly very pale and I was carried forward on the crest of an absolute conviction. "You'd go back to him to-morrow," I said.

We remained silent, watching each other, absorbed in each other for a full minute. Then with a laugh she drew her wretched, moth-eaten furs closer about her shoulders.

"I suppose that's true—I suppose that's why I wanted the money."

So the struggle came to an abrupt end. I went with her down the narrow stairs to the door and there was something about her, as she went in front of me—something about the carriage of her shoulders or about the broken-down yet indomitable magnificence of her dress,

that made me uncomfortable with pity. She was brave. And faithful too in her own way.

"Quetzelango's some journey," she said to me, "but I'll get there."

"I expect you will."

I held the door open. It was raining and the dirty wretched street was brushed backwards and forwards by a cold fitful wind—as though an invisible drunken ghost were trying to sweep the place clean. I had an insane desire to get her back to the fire—to give her a square meal—to talk with her, as one decent human being to another. But I was clumsy with my own heart-sickness.

"You've come a long way for nothing," I said. "I wish you'd let me help you."

I saw her eyes in the lamplight. For a fleeting second they were the eyes of a sad child. And then they were very old again.

"Thanks. It's good of you. But for a year or two longer I can manage—somehow. Good night."

She went on, down the street, with her head up, her poor feathers and furs flying in the wind—like the last of a gallant and broken army.

4

Colonel Gay had pleaded with me. I think he had been so long and deeply concerned with himself that other men were unknown quantities to him. He thought he had to plead. And he didn't understand Lisbeth.

"Marry her, Fitzroy. Bring her back, for God's sake, and marry her."

Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious were wiser. They were the only two who knew why I had suddenly thrown my work overboard. They saw the situation as I saw it

—as Lisbeth would see it—and it was at once much simpler and much sadder.

I got up, shaking myself free from the glittering sand and shivering a little. I was sick of thoughts and conjectures that led nowhere. It was of no use to prepare myself for a future which we three would build up out of our incalculable and various temperaments. What we should say to one another was unknown, but in the sense of its inevitability it was already said.

One thing I did know. She would not marry me. She would see no reason in such an act. The scandal and disgrace which loomed so largely in her father's vision would mean nothing to her. It wouldn't touch her—"not the real me" she would say with that same simple and absolute pride. The "real me" would be shattered none the less beyond repair, because the man she had worshipped for his vast, heroic qualities was a mere cad who had thought of nothing but his own ends. What refuge could my name offer from such a knowledge? Why, if she loved me—then perhaps.

Well—she didn't and never had—not in the only way that could have saved us both. Enough of that.

There remained a very straightforward difficulty to keep my mind from useless speculation. If there was anything in Finney's warning, I shouldn't get to San Juan at all. It is sometimes pretty hard for an Englishman to realise just how far he has travelled from his nearest London policeman and all that reassuring figure stands for. But I knew enough, if only from Smith himself, to know that I had to depend on my remaining right arm for whatever security I wanted to enjoy. If what stood for authority in this place didn't mean me to travel by that train to-morrow, I shouldn't travel. And if I made myself objectionable they were as likely to shoot me

as shut me up, and that telephone message to the British Consul, so humorously prescribed by Captain Otto, would avail me just nothing at all.

All the same I was going to San Juan.

It must have been close on two o'clock when I got back to the Libertad. Finney needn't have worried about his last drink and early closing hours. The rest of the village slept darkly—or else it had poured all its feverish, objectless life into the stifling confines of the Libertad's bar. Several feuds seemed to be in the course of settlement and I was in time to see my poor Finney flung out head first followed by a crew of *aguardiente*-demented riff-raff, who proceeded down the village street, punctuating the deathly silence with wild revolver shots.

The Baron came last. He was quite drunk, but after his own manner, which was a very calm and far-seeing one. He knew better than to be in the van of such a procession. He made a peculiarly unprepossessing figure as he stood for a moment in the lighted doorway, mopping a very dirty and unshaven face with a very dirty handkerchief, and I have no idea what instinct made me trust him. Perhaps I had been rather touched by this defence of me with the empty whisky bottle. (For it must have been empty. He was anything but rash or wasteful.) At any rate I waylaid him.

"Is it true," I asked, "that they're not going to let me get to San Juan?"

"Quite true, my friend. I heard *ce beau jeune homme* Anderson give the order." (When he was drunk the Baron sprinkled his conversation with every language which came handiest.) "And I guess his orders stand in this hole."

"I guess so too. But I'm going. What's to be done?"

"Dead set on it, *hein?*"

"Dead."

"Well, you won't manage it—not by train."

"How far is it?"

"Across country? About fifty miles. Hard going. There's a mule-track across the mountains."

"I could walk it."

"*Per Dios!* You English!" He burst out into a big laugh. "Certainly. Walk it. There's a signpost at all the crossroads and a most excellent hotel."

"Shut up," I said. "I'm serious. I've got to get there. And I'm in a hurry."

"Who's after you? The Police?"

"No one's after me. I'm racing someone though."

"Who? The devil?"

I took a chance.

"A woman."

I saw his face alter. I had touched the adventurer in him—the seeker after change and strange and fairy happenings. He was a ruffian, but at that faint odour of romance he became grave and almost lofty in manner, like a knight called upon in some chivalrous quest.

"In that case—of course." His brown, blood-shot eyes flickered with a sudden humour. "You'll haf to travel fast, friend."

"Well, what am I to do?"

That flattered him.

"You've got a revolver, eh?"

"Yes."

"Can you use it?"

"Of course."

"I mean—will you? You can't afford damn sentiment in this place. I saw you with those niggers this morning. And it's you or them."

"Very well. I'll shoot anyone—you, if necessary."

"So *ist recht.*" He tucked his big arm in mine. "Now pretend to be as drunk as I am."

Looking back on that scene I can laugh now. I knew even then that we made an excruciatingly funny if alarming spectacle as we reeled down that empty street with the mouths of the tumbled, silent hovels gaping blackly at us. The Baron sang—about his *Liebchen* in a voice thick with *aguardiente*—and took casual shots at anything that caught his fancy from the moon to a buzzard brooding heavily on the low edge of a roof. His little shining revolver was the only clean thing about him and his aim was sober. Suddenly, we lurched into what smelt like a stable yard. The lurch I guessed to be only apparently accidental. I reeled against the warm flank of a startled mule and from a heap of straw a human form wriggled out whose terrified chattering was stopped with a quick hand to the throat. We three could scarcely see each other. The high adobe walls smothered us with shadow. But now and then some movement brought the Baron's hand and the little white weapon into the moonlight. The Baron spoke in Spanish, rapidly and quietly. The *muletero* did not so much as answer. I daresay the principle of *force majeure* was too familiar to him. He began to scuffle backwards and forwards in the dark and I heard the dull plump of a heavy Mexican saddle on a yielding groaning back.

"You'll haf to travel light," the Baron said softly. "No luggage. You can send for that—if you need it. You'll pass a pueblo or two. They won't catch you—not till you get there. It's only a mule track. Keep this fellow in front of you with your gun in his ribs. The natives are all right. They're too stupid to matter. But if you see anything in uniform shoot it on sight. You've got no *permesso* and it's no use pretending you haf."

I wanted to protest that I had my passport and that I was a free British subject, but the memory of Captain Otto's ironic injunction choked me with a silent laugh. I swung myself into the saddle. The Baron stood close to me, his hand on my arm. I think he was sorry to let me go.

"You haf the devil of a ride in front of you, friend."

"I don't mind that—so long as I get there."

"Don't let the sun catch you. Rest through the midday. Don't drink the water at the pueblos."

"Right."

"I'll stay here till you're well away. Not that this fellow matters. He'll be shot anyway. Better shoot him yourself. They're accustomed to it."

"You old Hun!" I murmured.

"And if they offer you the choice of a firing-squad and a few years in the *penitenciaria,* choose the squad. They're damn bad shots, but the *penitenciarias* stink."

"I'll remember, Baron."

"Ebene. Good luck."

"Thanks."

His big hot hand fumbled into mine. A breath of *aguardiente* fanned my face. I heard him giggle.

"If there is one lady there may be two. Give the prettiest my love."

I rode out into the empty moonlit street. My *muletero* walked at my knee with my empty revolver pressed softly against his ribs. The Baron had resumed his song and mellowed by distance his voice brought a kind of aching beauty and sadness into the night.

"Wie bist du meine Königin——"

So we turned eastwards, towards the mountains.

5

There are experiences which seem to be divided from the rest of one's life as if by a magic frontier. They may last only a moment, or they may cover a long period. Their reality is much deeper than that of everyday events and yet the final impression is as of a dream.

I know the ride to San Juan was like that to me. Other things are forgotten or wear thin and colourless with much remembering, but whenever I turn back to those two nights and days it is with a sudden catch at the heart. I am plunged deep again into a sea of enchantment, half evil, half beautiful—but evil and beautiful beyond any words that I can find.

In part, it may have been the sheer loneliness. And then again it may be that Miss Cornelious was right and that some people are born young and stay young all their lives and that at heart I was still the absurd boy dreaming of dragons under Old Stoneborough's shadow. At times, lulled by weariness and silence, I fell into a kind of drowse and it seemed to me that I was adventuring through a bewitched country up to the heights where my poor princess was held spell-bound by her false happiness. Then some sound would startle me and I saw the ugly thing as it was and myself too as a man damned to bring her fairy-tale castle down in ruins.

For the first hours our path cut through the jungle. It was like a passage hewn out of some slimy yielding substance, which had fallen into decay and become clogged with an evil fungus and foul with life. Things rustled under foot and slid away into a green smothering distance. The lianas brushed my face with their clammy unimaginable fingers. They swung hither and thither amidst the chaos of growth that hedged us in—that in its

lawless energy threatened to close down upon us, suffocating us. The moist heat lulled one's senses too, so that the fierce cries that would tear suddenly through those other hushed and furtive sounds seemed far-off and unreal like the clamour of a nightmare.

I have spoken of the loneliness. I mean that all this life was inimical and alien. If I had room for fear, I should have been afraid of those invisible things that followed and that watched me pass with their lightless eyes. A sudden star blazing through a gap in the dense entangled foliage overhead was like a signal from another world—a lost world to which I belonged—and I remember the answering flash in my own heart and the profounder solitude that followed.

I had not yet seen the face of my companion. I had not even heard his voice. He was a ghost among ghosts.

Finney had been right. There was something obscene and beastly about the place. Only its beastliness had a kind of horrific quality. It wasn't the beastliness of men —it was as though the sheer element of growth had been set loose to spill itself in a senseless, will-less debauch.

We climbed steadily. I could feel the lift of the mule under me and now and then a stone would roll away under the groping hoofs and slide down into some distant abyss of silence.

Then, at last, we were through. We had broken into clean space—stumbled upon the edge of the world. The moon had vanished. Dawn waited somewhere below the horizon and a chill and deathly suspense hung from the waiting stars. Behind me lay the jungle like a tangled bed of a great receded sea whose dark shield glimmered in the distance. At my feet I felt the emptiness of a ravine and beyond its incalculable depths were mountains, nightmarish frozen waves that loomed over us, threaten-

ing to break. They seemed to await the morning, as for a signal.

It came—so suddenly that the effect was that of a violent clash of sound—as though some invisible god had beaten upon a gong and the whole universe had blazed into life. My guide turned to me. The dark features, hinting at Heaven knew what far-off mingling of tyranny and serfdom, were set and expressionless. And yet I knew that he was moved by some emotion stronger than his fear of me, stronger even than native resignation.

"Agua," he said. And then pointing further south: "Fuego."

I remember stopping my mule short and dismounting and standing at the edge of the ravine as though to come closer to those two. They were the secret of this terrific world.

Amidst the towering masses of the Cordilleras, now changing from grey to amethyst, they remained black, permanent night-shadows. Other peaks quivered, caught fire and glowed palely. Their ominous crests remained cold and still and inscrutable. Yet the neighbouring mountains were dead and they lived. They seemed to hide within themselves a conscious, malevolent purpose.

Their heights were insignificant, but it was they who had torn the country across and across, disembowelling the earth in a witch-like fury that only slept. They stood alone facing one another, divided by miles of hidden chasm and valley. And yet one knew, that far beneath the surface, in the molten darkness, they communed together. From the twin horns of Fuego two thin and ghostly streams of smoke curled up into the quiet air. The cone-shaped, blunted Agua gave no sign.

"Muy Malo," my guide murmured, *"Muy Malo."* And crossed himself but without hope, probably without understanding.

I turned to look at him. He and his little mule stood close together. There was a sort of pathetic likeness between them—and some relation too between them both and these sinister shadows. They were victims, anyway, starved, ill-treated, utterly resigned. They lived—they didn't know why—and one day they would be destroyed. According to the Baron, one of them would be shot promptly for this night's work. Perhaps we would be shot together for that matter. Which seemed unnecessary. I slipped my revolver out of sight and instead held out a collection of dirty pesos and thrust them into the thin bewildered hand.

"You go back," I said "and give that animal and yourself a square meal. I'll get to San Juan faster without you both. If I don't, I deserve all the trouble that's coming to me."

He could not have understood. But at least I wanted him to hear the friendliness of my voice. He stared at me. There was terror in his eyes. (Was this some new, more subtle form of torment?) I pointed back the way we had come and at last he turned fearfully, incredulously, his fortune clasped tensely against his naked breast.

"A Dios!" I said in my best Spanish.

In the shadow of a flowering tree he looked back at me wistfully and I waved and laughed, thinking of the Baron and of all the Baron would have said.

My *muletero* and his mule took to their heels, scampering for safety to the jungle.

6

Her home lay in the heart of a grove of palm trees. It was white and square built, Spanish fashion, with slits of windows, heavily barred and above the height of a man's head.

On the west, where the trees had been cleared, was the entrance way, stone paved and cool which led you into the patio. And what had at first seemed like a prison became a casket full of coloured jewels. For there were orange trees with their fruit hanging like little golden lamps and strange gorgeous flowers and even English roses. A fountain played into a stone basin, and in the midst of the sheaf of softly falling water there stood a little grotesque gold figure, a native god perhaps, for in spite of its uncouth ugliness it had a sort of primitive dignity. And I knew instinctively that it was moulded in pure metal.

The house was built on a great ledge jutting out from the face of a mountain. On the east a precipice sheltered it from the constant winds and on the west it looked across a deep narrow valley towards Agua. There were two broad well-graded roads, one twisting downwards and losing itself in the dark green of a coffee plantation, the other, by which I had come, climbing to the top of the ridge and petering out into a mule track.

I had seen the place suddenly, looking down on it from an open turn in the road. It was near the end of my second day and I was footsore and light-headed with hunger and a touch of fever. At the wretched pueblo which I had passed a few oranges and tough tortillas had been all the food I had been able to buy from the gaunt-ribbed natives. The nights had been cold and I had nothing but the light tropical clothes in which I had left the *Arizona*. But the sunrays had seemed to get inside my brain and burn there. I had disregarded the Baron's wisdom and travelled steadily and stupidly fast. For pursuit had never really threatened. My friend Anderson who was a practical person would calmly order my arrest at San Juan—if I ever got there. But the habit

of "pushing on" had got into my system. To rest meant to think—to realise, and I didn't want to do either. It was all too useless. So that when I saw that white shining home of Lisbeth's I didn't believe in it. It might have been an unsubstantial cloud which my fond fancy had moulded into this shape. It seemed airy and unreal enough. For that matter I didn't seem very real to myself. The little native soldier, who had just gone scudding down the mountain side like a scared rabbit, was already a confused memory. I didn't believe either in the uniformed, very-much-armed gentleman with his bodyguard of two who met me as I came down on to the plateau. I'm afraid I treated him flippantly. I was afraid of taking him too seriously.

"You're the fellow who bolted from San Roberto without a *permesso,*" he informed me in pleasant English. "I've had orders to arrest you."

"I knew you had," I said. "But I didn't bolt. I shouldn't think any mule in these parts knew what the word meant."

"Where is the animal—and I suppose you had a *muletero* along with you—what have you done with them?"

"I shot them," I explained. "I was told it was the right thing to do."

He smiled unwillingly.

"Well—and there was a sentry posted on the road. Did you shoot him too?"

"No. I disarmed him. His rifle is somewhere in the bushes. I don't know where he is. He was running fast the last time I saw him."

"Well, he can run as fast as he likes—we'll catch him."

"I hope," I said, "that you'll treat him fairly. I took him by surprise and though I have only one arm and am not in training, I am very strong. He hadn't a chance."

"No one gets more than one chance in this country," he retorted.

We stood looking at one another. One of the disadvantages of a slight touch of fever is that it is difficult to concentrate. I found my mind wandering. I felt sure I had seen this man before. No—not him—perhaps, but his brother.

"You know, I didn't serve in the Guards myself," I said, "but I fancy you did."

"Oxford?" he asked.

"Balliol."

"Well," he said. "I always said we turned out the best sportsmen. That was a stiff trek you made. When I had a 'phone message just now that your *muletero* had come back, I left you to the coyotes. You must be all in."

"Nearly."

"Under the circumstances I shall send you back by the next train and tell Anderson to go gently with you for old times' sake. Of course, I ought to shoot you. That's the order."

"That's a very drastic one—for a peaceful country."

"This isn't a peaceful country. The train goes down in an hour."

I was clear-headed enough now.

"You think me mad as a hatter," I said, "but I'm not so mad as all that. I've come here for a good reason. And first of all I've got to see this General of yours—this John Smith."

"He's not here. And when he does come, he won't be bothered."

"Oh, yes, he will. He knows me."

"Well, he's not here."

"Then his wife."

I thought the withered lined young face changed—

became suddenly perplexed and anxious. "You see," I said, "I'm her oldest friend and I've come from her father who is dying. I've got to see her. It's serious."

He looked me up and down.

"She'll think I've brought her a beach-comber," he said. "But I'll risk it. What's your name?"

"Euan Fitzroy."

He smiled.

"You don't look it," he commented.

So we went together through the cool shadowy porch-way, past two sentries, who kept guard as over great treasure into that secret garden.

And there was Lisbeth—and I at my journey's end.

II

1

SHE stood on the far side of the patio, on the verge of the verandah's shadow. A brilliant feathered macaw, like a living flower, was perched beside her and she smoothed its gravely extended crest and talked to it. I could not hear her voice, but I could see her lips move and their playful, affectionate smile. Some sort of soft sunny-coloured stuff clothed her in long lines so that she seemed taller than my picture—and older.

The patio was like a great well and filling fast with night. Overhead the square patch of cloudless sky was already sapphire dark so that the after-glow on the high adobe walls seemed a reflection from a secret source of light in the garden itself. The little orange lamps in the dark green trees shone raylessly. And held in some forgotten patch of sunshine, the strange god came to life behind his moving crystal wall and to the music of the falling water seemed to move—to make solemn rhythmic incantations. There was a whirr of startled invisible wings, then silence again. In that mysterious garden were gold and silver, dusk and enchantment.

As I saw her, I stood still like a man on whom a spell has fallen. But she had heard us. She turned and came slowly across the patio, in and out of the shadowy flowers, moving with that easy grace which gave her smallness dignity and a hint of latent strength. My companion advanced to meet her. He had dropped the

bearing of an O. Henry desperado and had become a war-time Guardsman. I could almost hear the knightly click of spurs. He drawled pleasantly: "Forgive me, Señora. But this man says he knows you. Calls himself Euan Fitzroy."

We were within two paces of one another. Her eyes rested on me. Not for an hour of my life had I forgotten them and their strange heart-penetrating blue. Yet it seemed that I had forgotten everything.

As to her, I must have seemed simply impossible. A minute before I had been ten thousand miles away—out of her life—a sober, civilized English gentleman of whom she thought sometimes, perhaps, with a gentle kindliness. What had he to do with this rapscallion, dirty, down-at-heel, two days' growth of black beard on a swarthy face that the sun had burnt to leather?

Then her eyes met mine. And at first she was deadly pale, and then as swiftly the sensitive colour had flooded her cheeks and gone again. I saw her mouth quiver and the quick contraction of the fair brows—as when she was at once puzzled and deeply moved.

"But it *is* Euan!"

I tried to laugh.

"It really is—though I don't feel real"

"I thought I had fallen asleep—and dreamed that I was at home."

"Don't tell me I looked like this at Stoneborough!"

We both laughed then, tremulous and incredulous still. She had given me her hands and I held them fast. Outwardly, it was a joyous recognition. But inwardly everything had changed. We both knew it—as one does know that kind of thing, in a flash, without word or sign, the thought that she had kissed me, that we had been playfellows and lovers made us both shrink back into our-

selves. We weren't even strangers. We were people who had known each other in some other life and who were troubled—almost antagonized by the stirring of old memories.

"I'm sorry, Lisbeth—dropping on you like this—out of the clouds—in this state. You see, they wouldn't let me come by train—I had to walk."

"But I don't understand."

"He hadn't a *permesso,*" my guide explained. "You know the General's orders, Señora. He might have been shot. If he had only wired."

He looked at me with a quizzical reproof. As for me, I hadn't realised in my set and obstinate haste the part I might have to play. In my imagination I had met John Smith forthwith—faced him out in an immediate encounter—blown his damnableness to the winds with my gathering rage and contempt. But life is at once simpler and more difficult than one's dramatic fancies. It goes its way. One eats, one sleeps, one exchanges commonplaces through the course of a tragedy.

"I suppose it was that fellow Anderson," I muttered stupidly. "He annoyed me. Besides I had a notion of surprising you."

"Well, only ordinary things surprise us here."

Lisbeth turned to him. She had become very quiet. The first reaction of amazement and even delight was over. Some new realization had come to her and she had withdrawn herself.

"Sir Euan is an old playmate of mine, Colonel Decies."

The Colonel raised his eyebrows at me.

"I'll believe anything of him when he's had a wash and a change of clothes. You'll allow me—won't you?—to provide things until your own come—Sir Euan?"

He threw in the title with a little quirk of laughter—

and I could have laughed too at the sheer grotesqueness of it all.

"I shall be awfully obliged—I want a square meal as badly as anything—tortillas—neither appetising nor sustaining—you know."

I felt I might make a fool of myself. Weakness broke over me. Her hand still lay in mine—unwilling. I knew. But I didn't seem able to let go. I was shaking too like an infatuated boy at the mere touch of her. I saw the old compassion come into her face. And I pulled myself up. I would have none of that. I was almost angry.

"It's nothing—the sun—a touch of fever—nothing at all."

Young Colonel Decies tucked his arm in mine.

"I'll take charge of him, Señora." He added companionably—"Glad I didn't shoot you on sight, Sir, but Anderson will be dreadfully disappointed."

2

I am of tough fibre. After I had been doped with quinine and had bathed and shaved and adjusted myself to Decies' excellently tailored uniform, I was more or less my own man again. We three dined together by candle-light in the cool white painted dining-room and afterwards sat out on the patio and drank coffee and chatted. It was all very English, and pleasant and casual. I might have dropped in for a week-end visit.

There was a fourth presence with us. I, at least, was not unconscious of him for a moment. And once Decies spoke of him—once only, but in an abrupt, impatient way as though his real preoccupation had suddenly broken through.

"The General must be on his way back," he said. "We shall know to-morrow."

(Know what? That this fine hero of theirs was only a common blackguard? Or what else? There was some other crisis. I had felt its approach at San Roberto. Here it was near its head. The native servants knew of it. The knowledge was in their dark faces as they watched us. As for me—I seemed to see the thing riding up to us through the night—a strange rider, with the inscrutable visionary eyes.)

But I laughed.

"Is everyone a General in this country? Even the English manager of an English gold mining company?"

Decies narrowed his eyes at me.

"There are no Englishmen here. Only adventurers. And your precious shareholders can thank their stars that their representative runs the only Army that matters in these parts."

He closed the subject firmly. We went back to my own affairs. And I lied—not successfully perhaps, for Decies had the air of a man whose ears have been attuned to lies too long to be easily deceived, but with an astounding fluency. For that matter, I felt like someone in a dream in which everything is possible and natural. I told them how I had grown restless with the ordered confinement of English life and had thrown everything overboard to travel. And Decies had nodded, in his pleasant well-bred way accepting my explanations at their face value.

"That's why we're all here," he said. "England was, is, probably always will be the centre of the whirlwind. But we've been in the vortex too long. We can't stick the safety."

Presently he left us and Lisbeth and I sat alone and

silent watching a moonbeam move like a slow searchlight from flowers to trees and fountain to the closed doors of the patio. It climbed the walls at last and left us in a pale darkness. But I saw Lisbeth vividly—was sharply aware that the very pose of her upright body was a gesture of reserve. Her eyes had never once met mine.

Now that we were alone it seemed that we had nothing to say to one another. The news, the common memories that should have flowed easily between friends so strangely met, choked at their source. But, indeed, friendship had gone. We had become antagonistic, absurdly obscurely on guard—I with my wretched knowledge that made me feel like an assassin, waiting for my moment.

It had not come. That much was clear to me. She must think what she must of me, my reckoning had to be with the man himself.

Well, I have to tell things as they were. And I recognised even then with a sort of consternation a subtle dangerous change in my own temper. I had come within his sphere again. His influence seemed to breathe out of the very walls that surrounded us. It made me doubt—not myself, not even the unhappy derelict Paula, beating her pitiful disastrous way to the storm-centre, much less the truth of her story, but rather the very foundations on which we build our conduct, our judgments.

It was Lisbeth herself—this house—this garden—set in the midst of chaos—something royal—vast—big gestured. I have to throw out words as they come to me to explain what was inexplicable. It seems childish to say that the very room in which I was to sleep with its austere magnificance, the rare, lovely things pillaged from every civilization that had ever tried to express its spirit in stone and metal, the great emerald shining darkly on Lisbeth's

hand, should make me feel like a cheapjack moralist. And yet there lies at least something of the truth.

"By God, Fitzroy," he had said. "I'll give her a kingdom yet. She shall have all the jewels that men ever sweated and died to bring out of the earth."

He had done something of all that—perhaps at a cost no less terrific to himself. Not even in this country of boundless possibilities could a man have attained and given this fantastic splendour without a titanic effort of mind and body. Contempt of him at least became ridiculous.

And Lisbeth—? I had said good-bye to a child. She moved and spoke like a woman on whom a mantle of responsibility and even power had fallen. If the charm of innocence had gone, she had grown, had widened, deepened. I did not know her any more. She had become unfathomable. Happy or unhappy? I had no clue.

I knew that she was not afraid of me. Lisbeth had never been afraid. But she mistrusted me. Her instinct for truth and fineness had been warned. What, after all, had I come for, I, who had said in effect, "Next time we meet you will have to remember that I love you."

I broke our silence.

"You're sorry I've come, Lisbeth."

She turned her head. For the first time she looked full at me, challenging me with her own beauty.

"That makes me seem very ungracious, doesn't it? No, I'm not sorry—only anxious and puzzled. You've come at a dangerous time. And then—I don't understand—why you should have come in this way—without telling us. It's not like you to do things—rash, headlong things."

"No, I'm a cautious fellow." (But not so cautious, I thought wryly, but that I had set my whole love on one

woman for ever more.) "Still, even cautious fellows travel, and if they happen to be in the neighborhood of friends, they call."

She smiled faintly, rather sadly, as though she knew that I was only playing with her.

"This isn't Europe, Euan; only people who are desperate about something—or for something come here. And you did risk your life. You might have lost yourself on those mountains. Or they might have shot you. Things are like that here. Life isn't important."

"An ideal country, Lisbeth."

It slipped out. It shows our strange, sad relationship in these days, that I, who would have died to save her, should have struck out, instinctively like a fencer who sees an opening and delivers his thrust, almost without thought. I saw her draw herself up. Then she laughed, but proudly keeping me at bay:

"You don't forget, Euan."

"No," I admitted ruefully.

She said after a moment.

"It's a country for people who are not afraid. You mustn't know what fear is. No one is ever safe. Even the ground under your feet can fail you." She turned her head a little and I fancied that the ghostly walls of the patio had melted and that she was looking across the black spaces to those two sinister and waiting shadows. "People build cities—and to-morrow they're a heap of dust and ruin."

"You're not afraid?"

"No—not of that."

"Other people are afraid for you. I mean your father, Lisbeth. He's very ill and helpless. He has heard things—he has begun to worry."

"I write to him that I am happy."

"I know. It's not that. You seem a long way off to him. He wants to see you."

She was silent. I felt that her thoughts were groping through the dark to discover mine. She said at last—slowly painfully, choosing her words.

"That hurts me. Because I can't go. I wouldn't if I could. There's going to be fighting here. My father is a soldier—he must understand."

"Why should fighting here concern you—English people?"

"We're not English. We're Quetzalangans. My husband has been one for the last two years. You heard him called a General and you laughed. I know that it must have seemed funny—ludicrous—a Central American General sounds to you like a figure in a comic opera."

"I'm not laughing. I'm only trying to understand."

"The San Juan Mine Company is a success. One day the people in Stoneborough who thought they were ruined will be rich. It's my husband who has saved them. But if he hadn't had force behind him, it would have been different. People are afraid—even the President."

"If there is fighting and danger he should be glad for you to be in safety."

"That is between him and me, Euan."

I stood up involuntarily. It was like a blow in the face and that I had seemed to deserve it made it no less intolerable. And yet my own hurt did not matter. If I could have saved her and that staunch pride in her I would have gladly dropped dead at her feet.

"You think that I am interfering—unpardonably interfering, don't you? You think I ought not to have come at all?"

She stood beside me, looking at me as though she were trying to look into my heart.

"I don't know. I don't understand. You see, you haven't told me why you've come."

"Your father sent me."

"To fetch me—bring me home?"

I nodded and she made a gesture, full of an impatient sadness. I knew her thought. "You are the last man in the world my father would have sent. And you are the last man in the world who should have come."

On a sudden impulse I took her hand and held it. It was an instinctive movement as though I'd hoped some miracle from that physical contact. She must at least feel that I was Euan Fitzroy and meant faithfully and well by her.

"I may be a blundering fool, Lisbeth, but you used to trust me. Can't you trust me now?"

"I used to," she made an effort. "I do—of course I do."

But she withdrew her hand. And she had not hidden the flat weariness of her voice. I made no further effort. It was useless. One thing, at least, she knew. I threatened her peace.

I slept badly. The fever mounted again and played tricks with me. I imagined that I was back in the War and heard the tread of marching feet outside my walls, the rattle of fixed bayonets, a sharp low word of command. I drifted out into the mountainside and was lost again in that appalling solitude. I couldn't see the rough track in front of me. I hurried like a blind man, breaking my bleeding feet against the rocks, and my heart contracted with deadly fear. And behind me and before me marched those two great shapes, evil, majestic, unescapable. I tried to fly from them, but they drew nearer. The earth shook under their tread. They became luminous as though their secret fires had begun to burn

through their flesh of lava. They smothered me with a terrific heat.

And then they were gone. John Smith stood in front of me, not looking at me but into the distance, and saying:

"A new dynasty of kings, Fitzroy."

And I was torn by a grief which woke me.

I saw then that the morning light had begun to filter through the high window above my bed. The nightmare darkness had broken and with it my fever.

3

I had my breakfast alone under the orange trees. A native woman heavy featured and yet graceful in her coloured Spanish petticoat and gay *gopilla* waited on me grandly. She spoke a word or two of English.

"*La Señora excuses.* Trouble—much trouble—"

But when I tried to question her, she shook her head. Either she could not or would not answer.

She vanished presently and a silence that was only intensified by the monotonous tinkle of the fountain descended like a spell on house and patio. Under other circumstances I might have enjoyed that peace, been glad to stay idle and watch the pleasant sunlight peer between the trees and hanging fruit on to the mosaic of flowers and coloured stone. But to my mood the quiet was ominous. As the day wore on, it drove me on a restless search. But it was not Lisbeth I wanted to find. I knew now that if it had been possible I would never have seen her again. It was not that I had ever underestimated the tragic difficulty of my position. But with all the decency and loyalty of which I was capable I had, I knew, mastered myself and made my love for her a thing of service. But she distrusted me. That was the one thing I had not

been prepared to meet. It was too unlike her. It was unjust. It stung me to a dangerous resentment. Something unknown in our relationship had come to life. It was like hatred, full of heat and bitterness.

Well, there was no escape. I had come and now had to await John Smith, accuse him, receive perhaps some exonerating explanation—(for I clung strangely and obstinately to that hope, as though in spite of myself I believed still in the fundamental greatness in him). Until then, I sought instinctively some new clue to the man himself—to the whole obscure business of his life.

He had lived here little over three years and this house alone represented the ordinary activities of one man over that period. I had to remember the wild remoteness of the place to appreciate the meaning of its deliberate, regardless magnificence. It was the home of a man who, at least, thought nobly of his own future. The long low rooms, that opened out into one another, raftered in mahogany, their inlaid floors spread with rare and lovely rugs were frankly planned for scenes of pomp rather than for peace or rest so that by an intuitive connection of ideas, I thought of Old Stoneborough and its austere and princely medievalism. The very furniture expressed, in other terms, the same crude, resolute passion for grandeur—the same hardy and even lofty disregard for comfort. If it was often grotesque, it was also fearless, the work of some native artist who still heard the murmur of primitive inspiration. By contrast, the niches of the cool white walls held Oriental statues—Chinese gods and goddesses, passionless and remote as the religion that gave them birth—vases, delicate, cloisonné, the rougher, more virile pottery of an earlier civilization.

The place was vast—or rather conveyed the idea of vastness by the spirit of its conception. Its builder had

possessed limitless powers, limitless material, unbounded energy. If he had stopped short, it had been of a set purpose. There had been no jumbling, no intuitive groping of a gradually developing mind. He had known his purpose from the start. And what might otherwise have been the expression of a rash undisciplined taste was unified and harmonized by that one idea.

There was one corner that brought the man himself most vividly of all before me. The other rooms opened out into one another. This was shut off, a little place by itself, and yet not to be passed by. For the door that looked out on to the patio stood open in a friendly gentle sort of way that would not be denied. And inside was a twilight that to a man coming in from the glaring sunshine was like a touch of a cool hand. A faint odour of incense hung in the untroubled quiet. By the tiny red ray of the altar lamp I saw a pale Madonna face, the eyes cast down with serene compassionate knowledge upon two *prie-dieu,* set gravely side by side at her feet.

I turned quickly away. God knows how much or how little I believe in Him. But that silent testimony to a spiritual communion between those two was more intolerable than any of those pictures of their physical love which would rise before me, like devils out of a personal, secret hell, to make me cringe.

If there were living people about they gave no sign, and I went out at last through the shadowy gateway on to the plateau. The two sentries let me pass without interference or display of interest. Whether they were a customary feature of Quetzelangan life, or only a part of John Smith's imperial vision, I could not tell. But unlike the tatterdemalion little native soldier I had first met, they were well shod and smartly uniformed. A kind of French Colonial Infantry kepi shielded their head

and neck from the sun. Their rifles were modern. I judged the men themselves to be either English or American—at any rate of Anglo-Saxon stock. For behind their solemnity was a glint of humour. At its worst, life is still something of a joke. No use any man taking himself too seriously—let alone a mere sentry in a comic-opera dago country like this.

I went on down the road between the walls of coffee trees. On the uplands of Quetzelango spring is eternal and the air was fresh yet warmed through by a constant sunshine. But there was dust in the wind that blew, as I knew already to my cost, almost without ceasing. And the dust tasted of ruins, of things dead and destroyed for ever.

A gang of *peones,* barefooted and uniformed like a medieval guild, passed me on their way down the mountain. They were laden with burdens that seemed bigger and heavier than themselves and they moved at a kind of involuntary trot as though they were forced to it by the staggering weights they carried. They kept close together and were quite silent. They were little men, dark-skinned, Mongolian-featured. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, but hurried on with intent faces as though they were driven by a relentless and impatient destiny. I stood aside. I don't know clearly why their swift, almost ghostly passing should have moved me so that for a moment I forgot everything else. I was swept by a sort of universal timeless pity. For thousands of years, down a road like this, under the same blazing sun-victims, obeying a purpose they did not understand, unchanging and perhaps unchangeable.

I followed in their dust. I felt that whatever their destination, it was the secret heart of this place—the nerve centre. At a turn in the road I came to a second clearing.

It was as though the lower ridge of the mountain had been sliced flat by a great knife and laid out, fan-wise, in streets of wooden huts, converging upon a central square.

At first sight, I thought involuntarily of the San Juan mine. Then a sound at once melancholy and deeply thrilling rose to me on the wind—a bugle-call.

A company of soldiers came round the bend, they marched well, like veterans, and it seemed to me that as they passed me lifting the dust to little whirling columns under their feet, I recognised them—just as I had recognised Decies—not their features, but a familiar expression, a familiar spirit that looked out of the hard eyes and measured me, though without astonishment or curiosity.

The Baron brought up the rear. He stared and after a moment ran back. He was shaven and sober and a not unimposing figure in his uniform, his sword tucked under one arm, his kepi at a smart military angle. He did not strike me as the less villainous looking.

"I heard you arrived," he said shaking hands warmly. "A recruit too, I see—*un officier.*"

"Borrowed plumes, Baron," I retorted laughing.

"Well, we can't all command, *hein?* Our little friend Finney, *par example.* Reduced to the ranks already because he cannot carry *aguardiente* like a chentleman. As for me—a mere Capitan—I who was Aas of my squadron. *Bastante!* I forget you are a doctor—*medico cervico.* A fine profession too. I am glad to think I shall haf an Englishman to tie me up. These damn half-castes know worse than nothing?"

"There's to be fighting, then?"

"There is—thank God," he glanced after his men who reformed on the square outside the hacienda. "It broke out last night in the city. We may be in time."

"Fighting for whom—for what?" I asked.

He winked at me.

"*Per Dioa*—law and order—my friend."

"Where is the General?"

"In the thick of it—with a mere handful. But he is too smart to be caught. *Ein schneidige Kerl*—with someone else's gold mine in one pocket and a *geniale idea* in the other. Na—I haf ideas too. But I haf not that—*je ne sais quoi*—which makes a leader, I am content to follow."

He shook hands, went on a few steps, then looked back over his shoulder.

"And the ladies?" he asked.

At my grim unresponsive face he performed a pantomimic gesture of exaggerated discretion and made after his company, running with an unexpected lightness and vigour.

I went on obstinately. I felt a thread had been given me and I had only to follow. Where the road forked I turned away from the encampment, valleywards. The coffee plantation petered out and the track zigzagged between rocks and a sinister upheaval of dark earth that were like waves petrified into immobility. From the great plateau the mountain had had a certain air of unreality, like the moulded shapes of some huge relief map. But now that I was among them they became monstrous personalities. They bent over me threatening and curious, till I felt like a lonely defiant pigmy, climbing into black jaws that waited only to close and crush him between their fangs of stone and rock. I know that the sound of an angry human voice hallooing to me brought me an almost physical relief.

The newcomer descended rapidly upon me from a side

path, scattering loose stones in a little avalanche before him. He was lean and lank and angular with a face made up of straight lines and narrowed grey eyes. I knew that an explanation on my side had better be quick and to the point. But before I spoke, his mouth relaxed into a rather satirical grin of understanding.

"Guess I know who you are," he said. "You're the English me Lord, who arrived last night on a little walking tour. Gosh, but I nearly shot you."

"If you knew how often I'd been nearly shot within the last three days," I remarked, "you wouldn't mention such a trifle."

He twinkled grudgingly.

"Well, you sure are some pedestrian. 'Tisn't a mode of locomotion I fancy myself, but I take off my hat. Come down to see the works? I am overseer here. Jakes is all you need call me. What's your full title and do I have to kiss your hand?"

"Thanks. I'm incognito. Just bow every time you speak. To all my intended executioners I'm plain Fitzroy."

At that he laughed, though I think he was slightly hurt at having the joke turned against him—or perhaps at the unheard of spectacle of an Englishman joking at all. We walked on together.

"Not that there's much to see," he added. "You can hardly call it a mine at all. You kick the nuggets as you go along. That mountain over there is stuffed with them like a Thanksgiving turkey is stuffed with chestnuts. Fact is, the river used to run there until our lil' old friend Agua did a side-spring and sort of re-arranged things. There's strata upon strata of the stuff—when we choose to get at it."

He led me out on to a platform of rock. From thence

the whole prospect changed. A moment before we had been the only living creatures in a wilderness. Now we looked straight down from a giddy height, into the heart of what might have been a grim caricature of a modern industrial slum. The hutments, knotted together by a curve of a grey furiously rushing river, were bisected by narrow streets in which dark speck-like figures moved hither and thither in agitated groups. There were even chimneys, throwing up thick streams of smoke in grotesque yet sinister imitation of the distant Fuego. It may have been my imagination—I know that at a sudden gust of wind I drew back as from the edge of an evil-smelling cauldron.

"Three years' work," my guide murmured contentedly. "Oh—sure—it's not pretty. The trouble with these native beggars is to keep 'em when you get 'em. That's why we've got to crowd 'em all under one hat as you see. Left to themselves they'd fade away in a night."

He pointed to the various features of interest. The works were primitive. As he explained, machinery was out of the question with the railway road three hours by mule over the mountain. But there was native labour—plenty of it and cheap. (He grinned.) And it would work too, provided you knew how to handle it. In one place they had actually succeeded in directing the torrential waters from their course, leaving the bed free for the sifters. True, a dam had burst in the process and a party of fifty *peones* been drowned under the eyes of their companions. But that was an incident. Plenty more where *they* came from.

With that he led me back to the road. And as though to confirm his statement, a gang of natives passed us on their way down to the valley. They were shepherded by two armed white men and some of them were roped to-

gether. They looked like a herd of pitiful, half-starved cattle, terrified yet unprotesting.

"A new bunch from a nearby pueblo," Jakes explained. "A bit scared now, but they'll settle down. Better for them than being in the native Army. They've only got to behave themselves."

Then, strangely, his expression changed, lost its harsh satisfaction, and became almost boyishly embarrassed. He was looking past me and involuntarily I turned. A woman on horseback had followed on the heels of that sad procession. She had reined up a few yards from us, but in a moment I was beside her, hat in hand. In the sheer unthinking delight of seeing her, I too had felt like a boy—acted like a boy. But that leap of the heart—(and it will be the same, whenever and wherever I see her, until my heart has ceased to beat for ever) was followed by a chill incredulous stillness, for she stared down at me straight and unsmiling. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes an extraordinary frozen blue. She was angry as I had never seen her angry.

"I hunted everywhere for you—you shouldn't have come like this—you had no right—you should have waited."

Her voice lashed me with reproach. It was a strange, frightening little scene. For Lisbeth, so composed, so self-controlled, was out of hand—beside herself. She spoke without restraint and in that outburst betrayed the truth. It was more than distrust she felt. It was direct antagonism. She hated my presence here. And the injustice of it all, flooding like icy water over my hot heart, drove me to answer with no less bitterness though under a guise of ironical courtesy.

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have you worried on my account for the world. But if you leave your guests to their

own devices you must expect them to amuse themselves in their own way——"

"You are scarcely a guest, Euan. I don't know why you've come even—unless you were sent—to spy out the ground."

"Lisbeth!"

Her eyebrows flickered. She was white now to the lips. But she had gone too far. And at last she had remembered the third presence. She spoke with a frigid, unnatural restraint.

"I'm sorry if I neglected you. But I had had serious news. You don't understand the conditions here. You should have waited."

The overseer, puzzled and propitiatory, came nearer, stroking her horse's neck. I gathered that respect for God and man was an offence to his creed and his deference to Lisbeth was the more touching in its clumsy stiff-jointed sincerity.

"Don't you fret, Señora. He'll come through. It'll take more than a crowd of dirty Dagos to do him in."

"I know," she said, head up.

"And after all," he added, "I guess a rumpus is about due. Even the General can't keep boys like ours playing noughts and crosses for ever."

She nodded, smiling down at him, and I could not but know that she meant me to feel the more how utterly I had been thrust outside her kindness. She turned her horse about and I walked at her stirrup in silence. She was looking straight ahead and in the flood of searching merciless sunlight I saw more clearly than I could have done before, the change the three years had wrought in her. The tide of inexplicable anger had ebbed, leaving her white and still and without disguise. I knew that sorrow at her own weakness had lamed her power of seem-

ing anything but her real self. And she was too old. True, hers was the fair skin that lines quickly, and her expression was not unhappy. But it was very grave—almost stern. The delicate sheath of youth had been worn through before its time by some vital experience and underneath was the woman, not afraid, but puzzled, incalculable even to herself.

And suddenly, a new fear knocked at my heart. And on that instant my resentment was dead.

"You're angry with me, Lisbeth," I said gently. "Try not to be. I've plunged into things I don't understand. Forgive me."

She turned at once. And I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"It is for you to forgive me. I am so ashamed. I don't know what was the matter. I can't bear to think of it."

"Why should you? It's all over. I'd try the patience of a saint, I know. Besides, you'd had bad news."

"Not bad—not really unexpected. We guessed last night when the train didn't come back from the City. A revolution has broken out. We knew it would happen—but not so soon. It must have been a trap. The Revolutionaries knew he was coming down to see the President. If they caught him it would be all over. There's no one else to be afraid of."

His name was not mentioned. There was no need. I was comforted that at least she spoke as though I were her friend again.

"Do you know what has happened?" I asked.

"Only that there was fighting in the streets last night. The wires have been cut, but a native runner got through this morning."

"If they caught him——"

"No—they mustn't. You see, it's always the same, the losers are shot quickly—so that they can't come back. But they would torture him first."

She heard my smothered exclamation with a sad impatience. "That's the way here. Marreno had Alvarez flogged to death—not publicly. But everyone knew. There were even—photographs of his body—afterwards. There's no pity."

"Lisbeth—I wish I understood—I wish you were out of all this. I don't believe in it somehow. Which is real—this or Stoneborough?"

She shook her head.

"I wonder. Poor Quetzelango! It doesn't know what peace like that means. I don't know why it is—perhaps there's too much opportunity—been too much suffering. I think too much suffering unfits people. There's more ambition here than anywhere in the world. But that's all. When a man gets power he goes to pieces—and there is always somebody ready to tear him down."

And she went on to tell how Marreno, who wasn't better or worse than the rest, had been President for three years. But lately a disgruntled ex-Minister—Pedro Carrenza—had been fomenting trouble and now had come over the Nicaraguan border with a horde of filibusters at his heels.

"No one knows how it can end," she said.

"Not even General John Smith? Doesn't he hold the balance?" And then as she looked down at me with a faintly frowning interrogation I went on quickly. "I suppose I have seen more than I ought, Lisbeth. But what I've seen, I've seen. And this isn't a mining camp—or a coffee finca. This is an Army Headquarters. Whose Army?"

"Marreno's," she returned firmly. "It's true—my hus-

band recruited it and organised it. There wasn't any other way—if there was to be order and peace. He knew there would be a struggle—he even wanted it. Because when the hotheads have been put down, the people will see that the time for these old methods is over. Everything will be different."

I was not conscious of any change of expression, or indeed, of any clear thought. And yet in a moment her voice had grown cold again. "There has been peace in Quetzelango for three years, Euan. Stoneborough, most of all, should be grateful."

I did not answer. If our friendship had gone, there was still some pitiful remnant of understanding left between us that made pretence worse than useless. She knew—What would Stoneborough, people like Miss Cornelious, have thought of those tragic bodies which could be had cheap—of the whip that I had seen hanging from the overseer's belt? Oh, Stoneborough loved its moneybags, like the rest. But there were limits. And Lisbeth herself? Her eyes might defy me—they were not blind.

Yes, there had been peace for three years, and in those three years the San Juan mine had prospered mightily—had in itself become a weapon.

Merciless and astute. Those terms about covered him. Even this revolution, unless he had been over-matched for once, would play somehow into his hands.

Lisbeth turned to look back over the mountains. Evening had descended swiftly and the fires had been withdrawn. The great outstanding peaks had become cold and dead. She pointed.

"The City is over there—only a few miles away—almost at the foot of Agua. The Spaniards built it three times—each time a little further off, and each time it was destroyed. The Quetzelangans are very proud of it now.

They call it the Paris of Central America. And Agua is extinct. There's even a lake in the crater. But the natives believe it is alive still. They say they hear it at night—muttering deep down—under the water."

But she was talking only to hide the thoughts that stood between us.

We dined together in chill dignity. Decies had gone—presumably to the rescue—and yet we were not alone. The silently moving servants, the relentless succession of foods and wines, which to us both was a formality to be lived through somehow, were all expressions of that third and dominating personality. I knew that Lisbeth, like myself, could scarcely eat. Yet she played the part he had set her. We were royally living up to some remorseless standard, under pitiless eyes.

And I remember the silence. It closed us in like prisoners behind thick walls. Beyond was a black emptiness into which my imagination stared. I saw a city in flames —a man flying from the red glow over those terrible mountains. Or—this time he might have risked too much —been too sure. And yet I couldn't picture him dead.

Lisbeth's eyes watched too. Was she remembering? Those photographs of poor Alvarez? She knew more than I did. There must be a pit of horror at her feet.

A kind of exasperated pity seized me.

"Lisbeth, can't we be friends? Why should you keep up this pretence before me? You must be sickeningly afraid."

Her gaze withdrew itself from the distance. She looked at me intently as though what I had said had started a train of puzzling thought.

"For him—for John Smith?" She shook her head. "No—somehow I'm not afraid—only excited—curious—as to how he will come—and when—" She added in a

low voice, "You see—I have a superstition—he can't be hurt—can't be destroyed—not in that way. I think he knows it himself——"

"You call him John Smith," I said. "Everyone does—as though it were a sort of nickname."

"Isn't it—like a disguise?"

But she stopped short. The silence had been shivered like a sheet of thick glass by a stone and one sound rushed in after another. The staccato challenge, "Alto! Alto!" was answered by a faint voice out of the distance. It came nearer, authoritative—reassuring. We heard the sentries spring to arms—the dull clatter of hoofs.

I half rose. But Lisbeth did not move. She seemed to have relaxed—sunk back from an attitude of tense expectancy into a dream. Her hand was pressed against her breast. And I knew the look on that white still face and its spellbound wonder at him.

As she met my eyes she smiled a little and was a girl again.

"He is coming now," she said.

III

1

IF I had had a choice in those hours of suspense he would have died. I wished him dead. Death could not wipe out what he had done to Lisbeth, but it would set a limit to his power over her. So long as he lived, even with half a world between them, there would be no peace and no forgetting. And yet at sight of him—at the first sound of that high-pitched metallic voice I had exulted recklessly, instinctively, like a boy whose team has come out best against great odds. I could not have helped myself. And now, looking back, I can see that therein lay his great power. He was neither reckless nor a gambler. But he bound men to him by their love of risks, gallantly taken, which at bottom is a noble contempt of life as a supreme value.

Servants had run out with lanterns. They held his horse. In their dark faces and in the faces of the armed men who jostled each other laughingly behind him there was the same look of sharing in a fine and gay adventure. But he was grave—no, grave isn't the word, neither triumphant. I don't think that at any time I saw him triumphant. His touch on life was too light, too sure for emotions which in themselves implied moments of self-distrust and doubt. But I had seen that same expression the day they carried him shoulder high through Stoneborough's market place—keen, a little amused at all this excitement, already preoccupied with things lying in the future.

He was hatless, in full evening dress with a loose fawn-coloured overcoat thrown over his shoulders. The shirt front was crumpled and darkly stained. He had kicked his feet free of the wide Mexican stirrups and I remember noticing as an odd detail that he wore dancing pumps. I could see their polish shine in patches through a coat of dust.

And that romanceless dress, against a background of violence and disorder, was somehow romance itself. It stirred the imagination by its very commonplaceness, its hint of everyday modern life overtaken by a medieval treachery, of a swift, resolute reaction. They had nearly caught him—but not quite. He had slipped through their fingers—but at the last moment. He had changed. It was not only the beard he wore, unexpectedly fair and close trimmed to the pointed chin. The real change lay in his whole bearing, in the carriage of the small, fine head. At sight of him I knew that in England he had masqueraded. He had known the conditions and adjusted himself, but the necessity had cramped and humiliated him. Here he was free. And in freedom he had grown—or perhaps had stretched himself to his full height. He had ceased to juggle with other men's laws and conventions. He made his own. He was master here.

A lantern flashed into his face. And I had a recollection—so vivid and so transitory as to be almost painful. I knew that I had seen him before—like that, bearded, with that same baffling look of passion and cold purpose. Somewhere.

The recollection slipped away from me and was gone. He did not see me. Lisbeth stood beside him with her hand on his knee and he saw no one else. That, at least, was certain. The escape itself might mean nothing to

him—a mere move in a game—but with whatever courage it had evolved he brought it to her as a trophy—a gift. As I watched them, with Heaven knows what passions fighting each other in my heart, I saw a look come into his face which gave its proud assurance a wistful, whimsical twist. It was as though he had said aloud, smiling:

"Was that well done? Are you satisfied now?"

Her back was towards me. I could not see her answer.

One by one other figures stood free of the darkly moving crowd. The Baron, his villainous features almost transfigured by an exuberant delight, seemed to be in some sort of attendance—not very respectful, on two other riders, a man and a woman, whose dress suggested that like John Smith's their flight had been sudden and precipitous. Under the man's Spanish cloak, flung back rather self-consciously, I caught the glitter of jewelled orders and the red bar of a ribbon across the breast. He was short, thickset, and sallow-skinned. His dark eyes moved in a restless curiosity from side to side. He seemed to be waiting, haughtily and distrustfully, and with an increasing resentment. John Smith glanced at him, spoke sharply in Spanish and in obedience the servants left him, surrounding the stranger, obsequiously helping him to dismount. I heard a murmur, subdued, faintly ironic:

"Il Presidente—Il Presidente!"

I saw Lisbeth turn to him and he bent over her hand with an exaggerated gallantry.

John Smith swung himself to the ground. Until now the woman rider had remained quiescent. Her wrapping of shawls which covered her to the eyes and her absolute motionlessness made her an enigmatic and, to my fancy, a rather ominous figure. John Smith gave her his hand. As though at a signal for which she had waited, she threw

back her mantilla and revealed to the uncertain light a pale oval face, intensely expressionless. But as John Smith laughingly lifted her down from a saddle, a fierce colour flared up in her cheeks, whether with anger or pleasure it was hard to say. For the lines of the full, beautiful mouth never altered.

I recognized her. The easy-tongued Decies had spoken more than once of this Donna Isabella, Marreno's wife, and what was more outstanding, as he had declared flippantly, the one Quetzelangan woman who had kept her figure after thirty.

She and Lisbeth stood together for a moment, with John Smith, smiling from one to the other, between them. In the Englishwoman's whole bearing was welcome and compassion. The Spaniard remained impassive, watchful.

At a sign the little tableau broke up. The President gave Lisbeth his arm. John Smith bowed to Donna Isabella, ceremoniously, with a hint of understanding raillery, and they moved side by side towards the gateway. Then it was my turn.

I held my ground obstinately. And Lisbeth's eyes met mine. I knew that she had not forgotten my presence for a moment—nor this inevitable encounter. She paused and turned her head.

"John—it's Euan," she said; "Euan has come."

2

He stood back to let Donna Isabella pass in front of him. So that we were practically alone. We stared straight at one another. I don't know what I saw in his face. It was unreadable. I know what he must have seen in mine.

A Paramount Picture.

JEAN ISBEL AWAITS ELLEN ON TOP OF THE CLIFF.

"To the Last Man."

Then he smiled, as I feared he would, with all that baffling, disarming charm. He did not give me his hand —(perhaps he knew instinctively that I would refuse it). He laid it on my shoulder and its slender strength seemed to send a message through my whole body—a greeting—a warning—a reminder.

"Why, Fitzroy," he said softly, "of course—you had to come."

Rescued and rescuers dined together; I made my recurring fever and the fact that I had already eaten an excuse for staying alone on the patio. From where I sat I could see them through the open windows and hear the indistinct murmur of their voices. It was like watching a play set on a stage just too far-off for me to catch the words. My eyes were sharpened. The gestures of the actors became the more significant. As a mere spectator I should have guessed at fierce cross-currents, playing beneath a smooth surface. But I wasn't a spectator. I felt, bitterly enough, like a disastrous, unwilling *deus ex machina* waiting for the moment of his intervention.

John Smith and Lisbeth sat opposite one another. He wooed her openly, flagrantly, as he had always done. His eyes waited for hers and when they met at last he drove a faint colour into her cheeks. But she remained grave and silent. I felt somehow that she was trying to hold him off, to give herself time, and that he knew and became relentless.

Donna Isabella and her husband sat on either hand with Decies and the Baron. The President seemed sunk in his own not very agreeable reflections. As to the Donna Isabella, perhaps as a woman brought up in the Spanish tradition it was natural that she should maintain an attitude of reserve. She sat opposite me and I saw the faint changes of expression that came and went over her col-

ourless face like wind over water. And I fancied that for all her feminine aloofness she watched.

Decies and the Baron supplied most of the conversation. In spite of their travel-stained uniforms they both swaggered successfully as members of crack and rival forces—Cavalry *vs.* The New Arm—and I guessed that their friendly contention had already carried them back to 1914. They began to mobilise the spoons and knives and to manœuvre with salt-cellars. For these men—perhaps for most men—war had no relation either to hatreds or opposed ideals. It was a game—and they the eternal schoolboy players.

And John Smith never took his eyes from Lisbeth's face. There was something ravenous about him. Once or twice he threw in a word—conclusive, for they accepted it with a nod or a shrug. Marreno sulked heavily.

Presently, the two women joined me. Donna Isabella knew no English and I could not flatter myself that as an individual I had any interest for her. But I was a man. Her black eyes travelled over me, veiled and smouldering. She made me uneasy, like the gathering of a storm. If I was only a man to her she was only a woman to any man. Her dark beauty was a bait. It had no other significance. My pride in Lisbeth was like a cool, clean wind. For first and last she was a human being, and her loveliness, less perfect perhaps, a light—an outward and visible sign. They were like night and day, these two. Probably, Lisbeth was unconscious of the antagonism, but Donna Isabella knew. She hated Lisbeth.

Their conversation, considering all that had happened, was strangely desultory. From time to time Lisbeth turned to me with her dear graciousness, translating, so that I, though we had become strangers, should not feel out of things.

"Donna Isabella says it was at a Government reception. They would all have been assassinated. But John Smith got word just in time. He had horses ready. Carrenza is in the City. They are afraid that a terrible number of our friends have been murdered."

Donna Isabella nodded. But she was looking past me, into the lighted rooms.

"Todos estan muertos," she said in her thick low voice, and I suspected that her indifference was real enough. Whichever party of these quarrelling, violent men came out victorious, she would be still a woman, infinitely desirable.

John Smith had come out. He stood at Lisbeth's side, his hand on her shoulder. I saw Donna Isabella's gaze drop. The moment her eyes, with their dull glowing life, were hidden, her whole face became heavy—almost dead looking.

"You two can talk of what you'll wear at the Victory Ball in the City," he said. "We want you, Fitzroy."

I had no choice. In any case I was glad to get away from that sultry, brooding woman. John Smith introduced me gaily.

"Sir Euan is an old soldier too," he said. "He can help us."

"That's over," I retorted. "Killing's not my job any more—not intentionally at any rate."

Decies blew out a mock indignant cloud of smoke.

"Dismal fellow! Who talks of killing? That's a mere incident."

"A very important incident," the Baron corrected solemnly "—the whole business."

"Nonsense. That's your beastly Hunnishness, Baron. The whole business is to win, as cheaply as possible to

both sides. Once you've got what you want—imposed your ideals."

The Baron snorted. He was drunk now and consequently honest.

"And vat ideals are we trying to impose?"

"Liberty—Constitutional Government."

For the first time Marreno came out of his sullen silence.

"Liberte—Libertad!" He translated the word to himself, rolling it over his tongue as though it had been an obscene jest. *"Bueno, Caballeros, bueno!"*

We sat down at the long table, which the servants had already cleared, and Decies produced maps. For my sake the discussion was carried on in English which Marreno understood. I gathered an attack on this stronghold was improbable. The insurgents—the *"verfluchte Canaille,"* as the Baron happily described them—had reckoned on cutting off and slaughtering the leaders. Having failed, they would leave the first move to their opponents. As I listened I began to understand the significance and quality of the Foreign Legion which John Smith had created in defence of Constitutional Government—incidentally in defence of the San Juan Mine and perhaps of other things as yet unrevealed.

"Seven hundred picked men out of picked European regiments," the Baron explained. "Devils who haf been through five years' fighting and don't know how to stop. Not much of a force, according to our ideas, but you haf to consider the conditions. They're worth three thousand of those wretched Dagos any day."

I could not help glancing at Marreno's face. It was a mask.

John Smith interposed swiftly.

"But they're precious. We can't afford a frontal at-

tack. We've got to cut them off from their supplies—wear them down. Scare them. Our aeroplanes will come in there."

"Ha, Decies—hear that?" The Baron poked the Englishman playfully in the chest. "Why *du liebe Gott,* the last time I went up I was taking pot shots at Woolwich."

"The deuce you were!" Decies murmured. "And damn bad shots they must have been."

Marreno looked from one to the other. He was out of it. They might refer to him. That was when they remembered their manners. But he was a mere pawn. And he knew.

"Economy. That's the word. Every man is worth his weight. We can't afford heavy casualties."

"That's where Fitzroy comes in—patching 'em up."

The Baron guffawed.

"He can haf my native Company as Sanitäts Corps. They're no good for anything else. If they weren't so dirty you could make 'em into nurses."

John Smith nodded. He was looking at me quizzically.

"It's true. We've got everything. The equipment is there. But we haven't a decent doctor or surgeon nearer than the American Hospital at Chivaga. We want you, Fitzroy."

"You forget," I said and met his eyes steadily. "I'm a bird of passage. To-morrow I may be gone."

He stood up. He sighed and stretched himself. It was the first sign of weariness I had ever seen in him.

"I don't think so somehow. I think you've come to stay. Wait till we've shown you what there is to do." He slipped his arm through mine and gave it a friendly, meaning pressure. "Then you and I can talk things over."

3

I met him the next morning at daybreak, coming out of the Chapel. He was alone. I had had a bad, feverish night, and if Lisbeth had been with him I think a sense of outrage would have been too much for the caution I had imposed upon myself. As it was his air of peace dumfounded me. It made me doubt my own senses. If this man was a blackguard, then also he was an inspired actor. But it was incredible. I knew instinctively that in the lonely quiet of morning he had offered up thanks to God for his safety. He hadn't foreseen an audience. Even now, by his greeting, I knew that I was hardly real to him.

"We're just off for a sort of review," he said. "Get your *desavuno* and come along. Afterwards, we might have a chance to talk."

So it came about that I who had travelled night and day for five weeks to reckon with this man spent my first morning riding at his dust, watching him parade his army of seven hundred men and a shuffling, barefooted horde of half-armed natives, as though he were at the head of a crack English division. In everything that he did was that possible element of the absurd. It should have been easy to laugh at him (as well as loathe him) as he sat his raw Mexican pony, an alert yet careless figure in his unmilitary casual English riding-clothes. But laughter was the last thing that would have occurred to any of us.

Marreno with the Baron as sort of A.D.C. rode beside him. What he thought of the display it was hard to guess. Ostensibly, the seven hundred were there for his protection and the maintenance of his authority. They should have reassured him. For as the Baron pointed out, they were picked men, reckless soldiers of fortune,

disciplined adventurers, veterans from every battlefield in Europe. Fighting was the only job life had taught them. The flood-gates of man's natural rage for risk had been flung open and there was no shutting them any more.

"And *per Dios,* they can fight!" the Baron said.

He pointed out a machine-gun detachment and three aeroplane sheds with peculiar satisfaction.

"That was my little affair," he explained. "I got them cheap—in Germany—under the very noses of the French Commission." He looked impudently in my direction "I brought over the mechanics and fliers too. A little surprise for the City to-morrow, eh, your Excellency?"

Marreno nodded. I never saw a man look more disconcerted. Over the native companies the Baron poured a flood of good-natured scorn.

"No guts, as you English say. In this country a battle is decided by a race, and the side that runs fastest wins. Na, we're going to show them a new way."

Marreno bared his strong white teeth in an angry grin.

"You please to be ver-ry funny, *Señor Capitan.*"

There were Stoneborough men in the ranks—the sullen young men who had lost their place in life. At home, no doubt, their people believed them peaceably engaged in making fortunes. Finney was there too. He even risked a wistful wink at me. The glories of a lieutenant's uniform had faded in the mists of aguardiente.

Marreno and his General took the march past. They stood together under the fluttering Quetzelangan flag, Marreno with his fingers to a borrowed military kepi, John Smith bareheaded. An uncertain native band played the Quetzelangan anthem. But it was John Smith's face that I remember. It set a tormenting question. Was that look of lofty vision genuine; did he really see in this queer half-comic, half-tragic ceremonial a great significant event?"

At last it was over. The two men shook hands and the Army raised their kepis and cheered lustily for *Il Presidente*. Perhaps there was mockery in their enthusiasm. I think Marreno suspected it. He remained brooding and distrustful.

"You can feel safe, Your Excellency," John Smith said. "In a fortnight you will be back in your Capital."

"I am proud of my loyal Army," the Quetzelangan retorted, not without malice.

John Smith and I rode home alone, as he had promised. He chose a separate route, a rough trail that wound about the face of the mountain, desolate and precarious. It seemed that he deliberately offered me my time and place. But I believe rather that he was not thinking of me—that I was no more than a witness. I heard him mutter, half to himself:

"They're all right. Too few, of course. But more will come and they'd follow anywhere."

I could not suppress the question:

"What do they expect?"

"Danger on the way—fortune at the end."

"Danger they'll have, no doubt. But fortune—here in Quetzelango?"

"Quetzelango isn't the end."

"What is? What have you in mind?"

He smiled.

"Vast things in a vast country. In England you see, Fitzroy, a hill remains a hill and a valley a valley. But here——" He made a sweeping gesture and his pointing hand came to rest on the horned and palely smoking crest of the volcano opposite us. "You see that fellow? Well, in a night he could fling these mountains into the valleys. He could turn the river back upon itself. It's a world in flux. Anything may come out of it."

"You are a filibuster dreaming the old filibustering dreams," I said. "But the time for all that is over."

His hand dropped.

"Is it? They say Agua is extinct. They're not afraid of Fuego any more. It has gone on smoking like that for two hundred years. Who knows?"

"If the ground is unstable, it's unstable for you too. You pretend to be on the side of this wretched President, but he distrusts you."

"He has good reason. At present we have a common enemy. When he has been settled, my turn will come."

I caught my breath. I felt like a man about to plunge from a great height into a flood whose depths and currents he cannot even guess at.

"You're very sure of yourself. But you might fail—for that matter you nearly failed last night. And if you did—have you thought what might become of Lisbeth?"

"Were you thinking of that all these ten thousand miles?"

"Yes," I said bitterly, for he had measured me with an amused kindliness hard to bear. "Yes. Of nothing else."

"You're a pertinacious fellow." He leant forward stroking his pony's neck. His voice was whimsical—almost teasing, but friendly and unmalicious. "Why have you come, Fitzroy? After all, you're no filibuster. I've nothing to offer you. And you are very much a man of honour."

We were riding side by side, so close together on the narrow trail that our knees touched. On my left hand the earth fell away into an abyss of shadow. In a moment we two might be at each other's throats. And there would be no letting go.

"Do you remember Paula Schenker?" I asked.

He did not start. But he turned to me and his eyes were penetrating and inscrutable. He was a fighter. He would watch for every thrust, but his confidence was serene and absolute.

"I remember her very well."

"She came to me—two months ago."

"So they didn't shoot her?"

"If you mean by that, that you have thought her dead?" (I caught at that straw. Yes, I wanted to believe in him —to justify that incredible, obstinate element in my enmity.)

"I never thought about her at all."

"But you married her."

"I did not marry her."

"Oh, for God's sake—don't lie. It's no good. I saw the marriage certificate. It was genuine."

"I did not marry her," he repeated calmly. "That miserable ceremony meant nothing. Neither my Church nor I recognise it."

At that I burst out laughing. If he had been shameless, I could have borne it better. But his monstrous sincerity drove me mad. It swept the conflict in myself to breaking point.

"You damned humbug—you damned scoundrel. You can justify yourself to your own precious, accommodating God if you like. But now you have me to deal with——"

He smiled.

"What are you going to do, Fitzroy?"

"—and Lisbeth."

He was grave but unshaken.

"—my wife."

"Your mistress."

I saw his eyes flash past me to the chasm beside us.

"I said once I might have to kill you, Fitzroy. I don't want to have to despise you."

"It's no use," I said. "Melodrama won't help. You know as well as I do that Lisbeth is beyond insult. I am telling you what you have done to her in the world's judgment——"

"Have you no better judgment?" he asked.

"You sicken me," I returned, unsteadily. "You have no pity. You do what suits you—take what you want. You break everyone who stands in your way. People are just tools to you—that wretched Paula, these men who came from the ends of the earth to serve your mad ambitions—there may be others, God knows. And then Lisbeth. You wanted her. That is enough. Her peace and honour meant nothing to you."

"I made her my wife."

"That is a wretched, shameful quibble. Will you come home to justify it?"

"No. I know the English law as well as you do. It means nothing to me. I should no more think of putting myself in its power than offering myself to a mad dog. She is my wife—according to the only law I recognise. That is enough."

"Shall we ask her if it is enough?"

"No."

"You are very wise."

He was silent. I could feel a conflict raging in him whose elements were utterly beyond my conception. I know it troubled me profoundly. It was unnatural and terrible—a house tragically divided against itself.

He turned to me at last with eyes like polished shields, shining and impenetrable.

"Very well. When the time comes I will ask her. I am not afraid. Lisbeth is great-hearted. I know her.

She will see my life and purpose as I see them. She knows what she is to me."

"Go to her now then."

"No."

"Why not then—if you are so certain——"

"I am thinking of our child," he said simply.

A blur spread before my eyes. Sheer physical sickness rushed over me. I felt his hand catch me by the arm.

"Steady, Fitzroy. These fevers play the deuce with one." His voice was caressing and pitiful. I shook him off.

"Oh, for God's sake——"

We rode on for a while in utter silence. The fear that had once already stabbed through my mind had become a certainty. It left me powerless—stupefied. My very rage fell dead. There was nothing left but grief and love for her that wrung my heart. Presently, I heard him speak again—but not to me.

"I want a child. I think perhaps I have a son—somewhere on the Yellow River—a parchment skinned, blue-eyed pirate fellow. But, of course, I shall never know—and now it does not matter."

"Lisbeth's child—without a name——"

He smiled faintly.

"Why should I want to give him mine? My name is less than a number. Who am I? Heaven and those old charcoalers know. What does it signify? I am myself. He will have the name I will make for all three of us. It will be big enough."

Then he remembered me. And he knew. He understood. I felt his lofty compassion turned on me like a warm light.

"I know how you see it, Fitzroy. I am sorry. Try and see it as I do—as she will. You said that people

were just tools to me. In a way that's true—even of Lisbeth. I couldn't have done what I have done without her. She is the woman for my man—the inspiration to my action. The first time I saw her I knew that the time would come when I should need her more than anything else in life. So you see—nothing could have stood in the way—least of all our poor Paula."

"If you knew that—why did you marry her?" I asked.

My voice was toneless. I questioned him mechanically, for it couldn't matter what he answered.

"We needed one another. She was in with a crowd of German agents. She would have been deported. I was in the Secret Service at the time. I saw how valuable she might be. It was an obvious duty."

"Ambition."

"Yes, ambition too."

"She was infatuated with you and you made a spy and a traitor out of her."

"Worse things were done," he muttered. "Inadvertently, she and I saved a British Army. You can't run war and morals together, Fitzroy. You only break your heart."

After a moment he asked:

"What do you propose to do now?"

"What I was sent to do."

"Who sent you?"

"Colonel Gay. Your wife sent to him first. He had no one else. He was dying—he may be dead by now."

"What did Paula want?"

"Money."

I thought he looked incredulous.

"Why didn't you give it to her?"

"I knew it would have been useless. In any case, she meant to follow you."

"So you have come to tell Lisbeth what you consider the truth?"

"That is what I am going to do now."

He leant forward and laid his hand on my bridle.

"No. I'd drive you over the precipice first. I don't want to kill you, Fitzroy. But I would."

I laughed in his face.

"If you're so sure of her understanding——"

"I am. But I'll take no risks. Women with child—are strange—have queer fancies. You are a doctor. You know the danger of any sort of shock. And she's not strong."

"You might have thought of that before. Anyhow, it's out of your hands and mine. There is Paula to be reckoned with."

"I can deal with her."

"She meant to find you. I think she will——"

"She'll never find Lisbeth."

"I suppose you're prepared to kill her too."

"It will not be necessary." He added passionately, "but I'll kill anyone who threatens Lisbeth's peace or safety. You can at least believe that, Fitzroy."

Our forgotten horses moved on at a foot pace, nibbling the coarse grass as they went. The fierce sincerity with which he spoke of her disarmed me—left me nothing but a sense of irretrievable disaster. Unmoral, perverted—mad—he might be all that. But his effect on me—at the worst moment of this conflict—had been that of a magnificent and even magnanimous opponent. His belief in his own justification was absolute. And there was his love. Amazingly enough, it was the bond between us that neither of us could break.

And suddenly I turned to him. My voice was out of control. I could have cursed myself.

"What have you done? What have you done?"

"Done?" He stood upright in his stirrups like a man cramped beyond endurance. For the first time I heard him stammer, tearing the words out with a straining effort utterly unlike his usual easy self-mastery.

"I have given her everything. All this—is the beginning—the rough foundations—you can't tell what will come of it. But I know. And one day she will see—she'll understand." He was staring past me into his vision. "When I have made these wretched countries strong and united, neither she nor anyone will question what I have done—I shall be justified."

"It may be," I said heavily, "that Lisbeth asks other things of you."

Was it imagination? or did the shadow of some invisible cloud pass over him? So that for an instant he was almost haggard-looking.

"What else can she ask? Oh, I know—I know—wealth—power—these things don't matter to her—perhaps they're nothing. But what they stand for—a man's sweat and weariness, the strength of his body, the courage of his mind—they matter, they must matter. I cannot give her more."

We had come to a point where the patch ran back into the road and he drew rein and gazed fixedly out over the gulf of rock and forest towards Fuego. I know now what he saw—a new Empire rising out of this chaos, the work of his hands, carried on his shoulders. And he would bring it to her demanding, "Was that well done? Is this enough?" I watched him fascinated. He was no fanatic. He was cool, calculating, far-seeing. I could not think of him as failing. In some strange way too, he was a part of this riven, tormented world. And yet again he seemed above all else tragically alone.

He dropped his ice-blue eyes to my face.

"Well?"

But now I could see my road, bitter but inevitable.

"There's only one thing that matters—how to spare her. You said that when her child is born you would tell her the truth yourself. Do you promise that?"

"Yes," he returned with violence.

"When will that be?"

"In three months' time. She will go up to Chivaga."

"Very well. I'll wait. She must think what she likes. But when she is told—either by you or whoever must and has to judge, she must have someone whom she can trust to turn to."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Are you the man? Do you think she trusts you now?"

I repeated stubbornly, "She can trust me."

After a moment he nodded.

"Yes. It's the best way." But for the first time he looked at me as he must have done at men whom he meant to kill, with hard remorseless eyes. "I know how to run away when it suits me, Fitzroy. But I know also when to stand and fight. You and I have always been up against each other——"

He turned his horse and rode on, and I followed, grown sick at heart because he had at last recognised me as an enemy.

4

That night saw a strange development in our relationships.

The two German flying men who were to accompany the Baron on to-morrow's raid came up to a dinner which had all the characteristics of an official banquet. We

were in full dress. By this time my own things had been sent up from San Roberto by a no doubt indignant Andrews, and Marreno had borrowed a pale blue uniform on which his flamboyant orders glittered restlessly. I guessed that the white dress which Donna Isabella wore was Lisbeth's. It did not suit her well. She looked sallow and heavy, consciously at a disadvantage.

I do not know whether it was John Smith's purpose to give that night an almost royal setting. A large and spacious living came naturally to him. At least, there was no attempt on his part to appear other than what I knew, at heart, he believed himself to be. As a Quetzelangan General he might have worn any of their gorgeous uniforms. But his evening clothes were not even very new. He carried them with that unforgotten casualness which was the essence of his dignity.

He sat at the head of the long mahogany table and was quiet and assured and smiling. He made me think of a chess-player to whom all these gaudy and fantastic personalities were just pieces. It had taken him three years to bring about this combination. A few more moves, perhaps, and the game would be in his hands.

To me he showed the old friendliness, half-mocking, half-affectionate. Looking back, I think he was at pains to wipe out the recollection of that shadow which had fallen across his face, not only from my mind, but from his own. No one, seeing us two, could have believed that I was witness against him for a mean crime. It was I, in my distress, who must have seemed guilty. I felt guilty. He shook the ground under my feet. He had never argued as to the right or wrong of things. It was his magnificent assurance that confused the issues, that set me questioning faiths that had seemed unquestionable. Was he, in fact, big enough to set aside the ordi-

nary laws governing ordinary men? Were his steadfast, immense purposes justifications? Was I about to sacrifice Lisbeth to a convention which a hundred years hence might seem as childish as other conventions already cast overboard?

He was ready to make an Empress of her. He *had* made her happy. Surely she had been splendidly happy until my coming? The radiance of it seemed to linger about her still like an afterglow.

She shrank from me. I could see her fight against herself. She wanted to be kind and friendly. But there was a barrier too high to be surmounted. It was not my love for her. The wretched burden of my knowledge had numbed all personal feeling. I wanted to save her. Nothing else.

She was so pale that night—of an almost unearthly delicacy and fairness. In her gold brocaded dress with her sunny hair shining in the candle-light she was like an English daffodil among hot, exotic orchids—like a sorrowful but very brave princess out of a fairy-story.

And yet as far as she knew, everything was hers—a husband whose passion burnt in the midst of us like a naked flame, a dawning motherhood, wealth, great power. Was it just because an old lover had come blundering across her path that she should look so grave?

There was another stranger there that night—a little Spanish priest, blue-jowled and beady-eyed who sat on John Smith's left hand. I did not hear him speak the whole evening. And yet he stuck in my consciousness. For he seemed a part of the enigma.

It was towards the end of the dinner. The Baron who was not drinking had just proposed a toast—"To the President!" to which Marreno had replied with a bow and smile not less ironical. It came suddenly, I suppose,

and yet I feel sure that we all knew—that we felt it coming as one feels the approach of a tornado. I remember that the room seemed to become insufferably hot—and there was a silence which endured several seconds in which we looked at one another—waiting. I saw Marreno's broad brown hand on the table grow white about the knuckles. Then it was upon us.

I did not think that, after the War, life could have a new terror for me. I have lived through bombardments that were like a madman's vision of hell. But I had never known anything so subtly terrible as that faint almost imperceptible vibration.

It passed. It was as though the earth under our feet had drawn a deep shuddering breath. We seemed to slip back into our places like the glasses on the table—like the grave-faced Chinese god who from the niche opposite had seemed to bow to me.

The Baron laughed.

"Our two friends haf stirred again in their sleep. A ver-ry suitable introduction to to-morrow's Festa, *nicht wahr, Herr President?*"

The men applauded. But I think we had been the most troubled. I wonder sometimes where the myth of women's fearfulness has its origin. In the midst of calamity I have found them supernaturally quiet, as though at such times their secret knowledge of vaster issues than this life came to their rescue.

I remember that Lisbeth had smiled at Donna Isabella, almost gaily, and a moment later both women rose to leave the table.

Nobody had noticed the native orderly who had entered. He stood at John Smith's elbow, stiffly at attention, but with his dark eyes full of an unresisting, helpless terror. He began to stammer his message.

What it was I did not know. But I saw Lisbeth pause on the threshold of the patio. I who knew and loved her felt the change in her like a charge of electricity through the nerves. The men had resumed their places and John Smith had his back to her. He turned to me with an odd, quizzical smile.

"Your little sentry has been caught at last, Fitzroy," he said.

I had almost forgotten. I shrugged my shoulders.

"I hope he hasn't been running all the time."

"Well, he'll wish he'd run a little faster, poor devil."

I do not believe that he hesitated for a moment. But he waited. He knew now that Lisbeth was there, on the verge of the shadow, watching and listening. The knowledge was written in the very setness and implacability of his expression. He gave an order. The orderly's hand went up in a salute. Then Lisbeth came back into the room. Usually, her movements were rather slow—of a gracious, lingering quality. But now she had shown a passionate swiftness that made me catch my breath. She stood at the table, facing John Smith. She was like a fine blade ripped out of its scabbard in a gallant gesture—like a flag unfurled in a high wind.

"No," she said. "You mustn't—I won't stand it—it's intolerable." And then she spoke in Spanish to the orderly and the man stood there stupefied, open-mouthed.

I had no clue to the situation. I only knew that something vital, enormously significant was taking place. We all knew. Each face set itself in a mask. I saw the Baron fidgeting with his glass, his thick lips thrust out in an expression of tolerant amusement. The little priest stared expressionlessly. And for the first time Marreno's face lit up with laughter, silent and malicious. In the shadow of the patio, Donna Isabella hovered like a white hawk.

But those two had forgotten everyone but themselves. John Smith smiled up at Lisbeth. All the charm and tenderness of which he was possessed was in that look. But I had seen the colour go from under the sunburn. The hand lying on the table involuntarily tightened.

"*Cridita*—I'm sorry—it can't be helped."

"It must be helped." She turned to me. She was alternately flushed and a deadly white. Her eyes that were blue as his blazed out their essential difference. His had grown pale. Hers had deepened. In the dim candle-light they looked almost black.

"Please, Euan, please say something. They are going to flog him. You don't know what flogging means in this country."

"It is their own custom." John Smith interposed gently. "There's no other way of dealing with them. If we were to admit milder European methods, we should have a stampede. They would sleep at their posts—run away from a coyote. Look at Fitzroy here—one-armed—and the fellow bolts like a hare."

He appealed to us with a laugh and a shrug. The Baron nodded portentously.

"This isn't Merrie England, Señora."

"Euan——" she commanded.

I stood up. I wanted to take my place at her side. I had the self-control not to so much as look at her.

"I am one-armed if you like," I said grimly. "But it's a gorilla's arm. Try it—any one of you. I came upon the man unexpectedly. He hadn't a chance. Once I'd twisted his rifle away from him there was nothing for it but a clean pair of heels. Nobody here could have done more."

I turned to him with an appeal which even as our eyes met, without my will, became a challenge. But even then

I had only the dimmest notion of the real issue between us. His face became stony in its hardness. Perhaps it was true that he had no choice. His Foreign Legion might worship him. To the natives he was Terror itself. When he ceased to be terrible, he might cease to be—as others before him. Perhaps even Lisbeth knew as much.

"Without iron discipline we shouldn't survive an hour, Señora—" the Baron murmured.

"Better not to survive them." Her hand beat a soft unconscious tattoo on the polished table. "It is monstrous. It disgraces us all. John, I ask you—I ask you as a favour."

I guessed that she had never asked anything of him before—that it therefore was a supreme appeal. And yet it was not an appeal either. It was a demand. And incredible as it seemed, for a moment at least he was afraid. Because he loved her and could not yield.

He stood up. He took her two hands and pressed them against his breast. We didn't count. He had forgotten us. He bent over her. It was as though he were trying to overwhelm her with the whole force of his personality, smother her under the volume of his passion.

"Wait," he said softly. "I'll make you understand."

I looked away from them both. A sudden sweat had broken out over my fevered body. He was neither crude nor primitive. Even then he was strong enough to play his game with a light, bold hand. But he aroused a primitive emotion that I had believed conquered.

When I turned again she had gone.

John Smith repeated his order.

"This is a cruel country," he said afterwards. "It is hard on women."

And then he took up the business of next day's attack.

He seemed serene and confident. But more than once I saw his eyes trying to penetrate the empty darkness on the patio. I knew he listened for the reassurance of that low voice.

When we went out later Donna Isabella was alone. She beckoned to him. She made me think of a lazy watchful cat that, freed from observation, steals what it can. And after that one moment, in which he looked about him with a fierce and undisguised disquiet, he mastered himself and stood over her, laughing and whispering with her behind her fan.

5

I did not go to bed that night. A profound unrest made the very thought of sleep intolerable. The dead wind had left my room full of dust and a fierce dry heat that seemed to throb to the measure of my own feverish pulses. Outside the silence waited as I did.

I remember standing under my high window, my head lifted, listening, I did not know for what. But I was sure that at any moment that silence would be torn aside—by a roar of unleashed violence, by a scream, by hurrying panic-stricken footsteps.

My imagination ran riot. The hacienda, lying white and silent under the moonlight, was stript of its secrecy. It was like a great cross-sectioned hive whose fierce and opposed activities I was compelled to watch. I saw Marreno, alone and awake too, pace his room, brood out his own black thoughts, and Donna Isabella gliding among the thick shadows of the patio, set on some strange purpose of her own. Most clearly, most pitilessly I saw John Smith and Lisbeth. I was the tortured witness of that ruthless and magnificent wooing which was to wipe their conflict from her very memory. She would yield. (After

all, what was she but a child pitted against his subtlety and strength?) He would throw his glamour over her judgment. I saw her eyes close, her face grow colourless and still.

There were things I had tried to keep locked away from my consciousness. But to-night they were too swift for me. It was as though a wild beast had leapt out of its ambush and buried its fangs in my flesh. At such moments, I suppose, men do frightful things, incomprehensible to their sanity. But it was only my body that went mad. My heart and mind shrank from the frenzied impulse and it passed like that sinister trembling of the earth.

There remained the future to be thought out.

Lisbeth's child. The very thought, even now, even for me, was fine and lovely. But for her? After all, a nameless child, for all the man's splendid boasting. And she was so much alone—so very frail, so very proud too. What part should I play, after I had helped to smash her world for her? I who would have died for her.

But dying was nothing—too simple—too cowardly. Somehow, I had to live for her. I would offer her the shelter of my name. But that was a sad formality, because I knew that she would reject it. To her it would be an inward shame added to an outward disaster. And I knew, as John Smith knew, and had reminded me with his ironic eyes, that she would never turn to me.

There was one possibility—that she would see her life as he saw it and in me a shadow of futile childish things. I almost hoped it.

I stood rigid. At last a sound had penetrated the silence. It was far off and very faint. It might have been the cry of a trapped animal. After a moment it was repeated, even more faintly, dying out like a breath of wind.

I threw my door open. The quiet was absolute. It poured over me in a thick muffling wave. What I had heard became the echo of my own pain. Moonlight played placidly between the orange trees. The fountain was silent too and the golden god stood naked and still in a flood of silver. I saw the macaw silhouetted on his perch against the light like a strange motionless sentinel. Yet the peace was illusionary like a mask drawn over an unknown face.

Standing there, I thought of Stoneborough's Cathedral Close the night when I had walked home with Lisbeth from the dance. That deep, heartfelt tranquillity and this hush were both rooted in ancient dreams, but between the dreamers was an ancient antagonism. Strange and to me unholy things were in this silence. The violent fancies of a sleeping tiger flitted through the shadows.

I caught my breath. For a light had sprung up on the far side of the patio and was hurrying towards me. It came in and out of the trees and by its pale reflection I saw the white flowing figure of a woman. I recognised her. A moment more and she was at my side. From the folds of the black mantilla that covered her head and shoulders her face peered out at me, ghostly white.

"Euan!"

"What is it? Is anything wrong?"

"Why are you out here?"

"I thought I heard something—a cry."

"I know, I did too. I couldn't rest."

We spoke in undertones. It was as though we were afraid of waking a sleeping danger.

"Where is the General?"

She answered strangely.

"He left me—an hour ago. Euan, he promised that at any rate it would not be done to-night. But I'm afraid. I can't sleep."

"But if he promised——"

"He thinks—he thinks I'm unreasonable—not myself. He was humouring me. He can't understand. I meant to go alone. But will you come?"

"Of course. What shall we do?"

"I don't know yet."

Her face came into the moonlight. Its youth had gone. Those lines which had always lain half concealed beneath the habitual look of dreaming gentleness were sharp drawn about the set mouth. The very shape of the eyes seemed to have changed so that their expression, even in that half-darkness was stern and implacable. So tender and yielding she must have seemed to him. But I guessed that for all that she had been too strong, and that he had stormed out into the night, for the first time tasting the bitterness of defeat.

"I saw it done once, Euan. It was an accident. They didn't mean me to see. 'Not fit for a woman's eyes.' That's the phrase, isn't it?—for things like that. I was out riding. They were just cutting him down. It did not look like a human body.

She turned sharply away as though even a moment's quiescence in the face of that horror was intolerable. I followed her, past the sentries who after her brief authoritative gesture, sank back into their former immobility, and along the steep road towards the camps.

From a large, distorted moon, hanging at its zenith, a pallid light drifted down on to the peaks and escarpments of terrific mountains whose roots were twisted in a black unfathomable chaos.

We were like the survivors of a lost world. Our own shadows, stalking monstrously at our sides, were our only companions. There was not a sound or a stir of wind. Far-off a little luminous red cloud hovered among the stars.

Once Lisbeth stumbled in the thick dust and I caught her arm. I was afraid for her. But, at least, I knew her better than he had done. There would be no turning back. And it was only my pity and my love of her—of her very obstinate courage—that made me plead.

"Let me go. I'll do whatever you want. But you're not strong enough."

She shook her head.

"I'm all right. They'd turn you back. I'm quite strong." And then after a moment, very simply: "Did he tell you that I was going to have a baby, Euan?"

"Yes, dear."

She did not seem to notice that escaped tenderness. She sighed a little and we did not speak again. At a turn of the road we came upon a camp-fire around which a little company of native soldiers sat or lay huddled in attitudes of animal exhaustion. By the red stars shooting up into the still air we could see the black huddled mass of their huts beyond. A sentry challenged us. But the rest did not move. Their faces were almost inhuman in their expressionlessness. They might have been dead men gathered round the last warmth of this dead world.

A little Quetzelangan under-officer, bare-footed and ragged came out of the shadows. He gesticulated and chattered anxiously. He was frightened. For this Lisbeth was a creature of fine steel. At last the protesting, fluttering brown hands dropped. We three walked down the uneven roadway between the double line of huts and for the first time the men about the fire moved. I heard their soft footfalls in the dust behind us.

It was like a dream, half-nightmarish, half-beautiful with the happiness which we feel only in dreams. For Lisbeth and I were together. She had wanted me as I had prayed for her to want me.

A barred door of one hut even more profoundly silent than the rest was thrown open for us. I took the lantern from Lisbeth's hand.

I knew what stopped me short on the threshold. It was not what I saw—for at first sight the place seemed empty. It was a memory. A dressing station—underground—in Flanders—after an attack—the stench of tortured human bodies.

I tried to stop Lisbeth, but she was already at my side. After all I was wrong. She never thought of herself. So that she did not know what it was to be afraid.

The light steadied. Its yellow rays reached out to the furthest corner. It did not move the shadow lying stretched out against the wall. The thing was motionless, half-covered by a filthy blanket. The rest was a pulp of flesh from which a slow darkly shining stream flowed onto the mud floor. There was no sound—not a breath nor moan. I looked round into the native officer's face. He stared, blankly, indifferently.

But Lisbeth was on her knees. She had lifted the dreadful body in her arms. She had been too quick for me. Already, the pretty brocaded dress and her hands were black-stained with blood.

"It was that we heard. We were too late. What can we do?"

"Have they bandages? Ask."

"They say there's nothing—not for him—that he'll be all right——"

"Tell them to bring water."

She gave an order. I saw the man hesitate. I swore savagely at him in English and he cringed away from me. Presently, he was back again, bearing an earthenware jar, which he set sullen and muttering at my side.

I had turned their victim over. The poor upturned

face gave the mangled body back its humanity. I remembered it. At the time it had made me laugh—a monkey-like, dark face agape with childish consternation. Now, frozen into lines of immortal pain it had its dignity.

"Is he dead?"

"Not yet, at least."

"If I tore up my dress."

"I've something better than that."

I had my coat off. I ripped my shirt from my back. Between us we tore the linen into strips. It wasn't enough. Piece after piece of the precious stuff became soaked and black and useless. But after all I have certain cunning. I am as clever as most surgeons with their two hands. Only, as I toiled, the heat of the stifling, fetid smelling hole covering my body with sweat, hope died in me. What hope had there ever been? What hope had this poor mortal ever known?

Still we worked together, Lisbeth and I. Scarcely speaking. We had forgotten one another. This thing that we did, futile as it seemed, was bigger than ourselves.

Suddenly the closed lids fluttered. The man's eyes opened. He looked up at me, as I fancied with a profound and melancholy wisdom. He murmured something, groping with one feeble brown hand over my breast. It was the gesture of a dying child, seeking instinctively for tenderness and protection. But I could do nothing more. I could not give him back the blood that lay spilled about us. A sense of impotency—of guilt and shame too bitter to be borne was in my heart. I bent and kissed him.

I had forgotten Lisbeth. But when I lifted my head our eyes met—met and held as though they would never let go again. And what I saw in hers I did not know. But it was not pity any more.

The crowded faces at the door scattered. We two seemed to come back from a long journey. It was John Smith who stood in the black aperture, looking down on us.

His voice was subdued.

"You have a strange respect for hospitality, Fitzroy."

"Like yours for men," I answered.

"Let that man go. Others will look after him."

"He has no need now of any of us."

I laid the body down. I put my coat under the dark head, covering the quiet body with its blanket.

I saw John Smith cross himself.

He gave no other sign. And yet I think he knew that for once his skill, his firm yet facile hold on events had failed him. An insignificant life had slipped through his fingers and become significant.

Neither of us looked at Lisbeth. I guessed that she was gazing down with an austere calm on that tragic figure, considering the ways of men, perhaps, and passing judgment. If so, I also stood condemned.

"Please go, Lisbeth."

She went at once, with a frightening docility.

Even then he was incalculable. His eyes ran over me. I suppose I cut a fantastic horrible figure, blood-smeared and half naked as I was, my poor stump of an arm revealed in all its ugliness. I had forgotten it. I was ashamed.

And then suddenly he laughed, with a mock of ruefulness and took the long Spanish cloak he wore and threw it over my shoulders.

"You'll catch your death of cold, Fitzroy," he said, "and then that will be my fault too."

6

After all the Baron did not fly next day. I met him on the plateau where the three smuggled bombing-planes waited their pilots. He was black with temper and almost incoherent.

"No—he must go himself—be damned to him. What does he know of flying compared to Karl von Eisen, Aas of his Squadron? But he will. He is General. A lucky shot from some fool native and it is over—with him—us—everything. *Ach, die verdammten Frauen*—they ruin me—everyone. It is the curse of Adam. No man escapes."

He stormed away from me, like a child whose favourite toy has been torn from him. I think he was near crying.

John Smith was already in his seat. The cigarette he smoked, the casually worn tweeds suggested a twenty minutes' trial flight. He looked down at me. I almost believe for a moment he was shy.

"Seen Lisbeth, Fitzroy?"

"No."

"I left her asleep. She was worn out, poor child. Tell her where I've gone, will you? Tell her Carrenza is holding a review in the Plaza and that I'm going to fly low and pick him off. Tell her"—his eyes twinkled but there was a deadly seriousness at the back of their laughter—"that they've got machine guns and that a few of them are damn good shots.

"Not I," I answered. "She's had enough to bear. Why should I frighten her?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She won't be frightened. She knows I'll come back all right."

"Then what's the use? Either you're safe and doing

nothing specially heroic—or you're not safe. You can't have it both ways."

"You're an exasperating, logical fellow." He sighed and fidgetted with his controls. "Well—so long."

The whole of his precious Army came out to see him go. In the end he went alone. He displayed a fitfulness of purpose that was strange in him and I saw his discarded companions glance at one another significantly. It was so obviously a gesture of bravado. And yet once he was up, well clear of the ground, their grudging temper melted into the old love of him and his careless and lonely courage. In a minute he was a speck against the blue, flying with a deadly straightness.

We waited for him there. Discipline was relaxed. Men hung about in groups. But they were very silent. After all he was their fate. And perhaps they felt as I did, instinctively, that this time he risked his life, sought danger for its own sake, and the charm which had protected him was broken.

Marreno and Donna Isabella, on horseback, joined us. They dismounted and took shelter from the sun in the shadow of the hangars. Across Marreno's dark unexpressive face there flitted two emotions so violently opposed that they betrayed themselves. He hated this foreigner. He wished him dead. But not yet.

Donna Isabella fanned herself and smiled. Her half closed eyes alternately studied me and watched the horizons.

The thought of a man's danger and possible death brought a sensual and passionate colour to her sallow cheeks. But the ultimate significance of his success or failure meant nothing to her. In her life there was only one element that counted. So at least I judged her.

There was no Lisbeth.

An hour passed. The look-out standing on higher ground shouted and waved to us. He was coming now. Men leapt to their feet, crowded forward as though to meet him. We saw his machine glide leisurely along the valley, like a great winged bird. We knew even then that he had done what he had set out to do—even before the crazy and reckless "stunts" which at last he played above our heads. There was something triumphant and splendid in that strong slow progress.

He landed well. A wildly, joyously cheering mob lifted him to the ground. But I saw his face. It was famished looking. He stared past us, seeking, seeking passionately. He saw me and the blood rushed to his eyes. Then on again.

Donna Isabella stood right in his path. He brushed her on one side. I believe he did not hear a sound of all that welcoming uproar.

Then suddenly the strange tension snapped. It was like a light breaking over his face. For she was there, pale and haggard, drawn hither against her will, perhaps by love, by fear for him, by the old enchantment. I could not tell.

He went straight to her. He took her hands and kissed them. For this was his real victory—that after all she had come.

There were tears on her cheeks. As she looked down on his bowed triumphant head I almost thought she pitied him.

IV

1

THAT night Marreno with General John Smith and five hundred men descended upon Quetzelango City. I went with them, nominally as surgeon, actually because San Juan was no longer possible to me. John Smith would have left me behind—came near to ordering me to remain. His insistence was a challenge—the measure of his self-confidence. My refusal seemed to irritate him. I was like an opponent who would not stand his ground.

"So it's you who are running away, Fitzroy?"

"You will know where to find me," I answered.

"Lisbeth will miss you."

There was malice in that—the first real malice he had ever shown—for he must have known that Lisbeth suffered by my presence. Her good-bye to me that night just before I mounted was the stiffest, saddest thing. We avoided each other's eyes. We were like guilty people. It seems incredible. But he made us guilty.

"We'll hardly see each other again, Euan. After all this is over you'll go on to Puerto Madero, won't you? You'll be on your way home."

It was an appeal, made knowingly and rather desperately to my fidelity. And I stood there stockish and tongue-tied under John Smith's eyes. She sighed. She began to give me messages for home, to her father.

"Tell him he is not to worry—that I am perfectly well and happy. And my love to your Aunt and Miss Cornelious and dear Stoneborough."

We shook hands. I knew that she had really said: "Last night didn't happen. I have forgotten it. Neither of us must ever think of it again."

As I clambered into my saddle Donna Isabella passed me. I had not seen her before. She must have been hidden in the deeper shadows of the gateway. Now with the swiftness of some wild feline thing roused from its hot lethargy she reached John Smith's side. Her white plump hand rested on his knee. She spoke rapidly, in an undertone, but, as I thought, with an utter recklessness. Her usual calm was sheer indolence; self-control she had none. Something had made her angry—or desperate—and every other consideration was swept aside. I saw John Smith look past her and she stamped her foot. Marreno was only a few paces away from them both, already mounted and apparently absorbed in the contemplation of the night-shrouded valley where lay his immediate destiny. He seemed neither to have seen nor heard.

John Smith laughed.

"Your wife is afraid I am leading you into needless danger, *Señor Presidente.*"

Marreno made a little enigmatic movement, which said plainly: "It is convenient for us to believe one another."

Finally, our cavalcade turned on its way. But I saw John Smith swing his Mexican pony about at the last so that he faced the two women, his hat down to his saddle girths, his head up. It was as though he said, "I who am about to conquer the world salute you." He was in rough riding clothes, ostentatiously unarmed; the Mexican pony was a shabby beast, the gesture in itself theatrical and un-English. But then as always he escaped the ludicrous, rising to a queer magnificence of his own. And what was stranger still, amidst these alien surroundings, beside men to whom an extravagant expression of feeling

was habitual, he seemed the embodiment of his race—more English than Decies with his inbred restraint. I cannot explain it. But, at least, it was his sincerity, a fine passionateness, which made that leave-taking a gallant tribute—to one woman or to both. No other witness could have been as sure as I was that it was to Lisbeth and to Lisbeth only.

And yet as he and I rode side by side, he never once looked back. His eyes were fixed on the distant fires of Fuego, flaming like a menacing brand over the invisible city. I could almost have thought the glow of it was on his face. Presently, he trotted ahead and I was free at last to turn about in my saddle. It seemed to me that I could still see her, standing there, gazing after us, with her hand on her breast, puzzled and sad perhaps, but not afraid for him, because of that strange faith. As for me—she could only be glad.

The pace irked me. I should have found relief in a headlong, reckless gallop. We rode cautiously and steadily valleywards. And I was soldier enough to appreciate the exploit. It was no mean feat to bring five hundred men with horses and machine guns down what was virtually a mule track. It meant leadership and discipline. The moon did not rise till morning and by starlight and Fuego's ominous red cloud we stumbled at the heels of our shadowy companions. The immensity seemed to smother our voices; the sound of our horses' hoofs was lost in the thick treacherous dust. For the most part we had to ride single-file, and each man must have felt, as I did, utterly alone, amidst an army of ghosts. But once where the track broadened a thick familiar voice drew up alongside of me. I think the darkness troubled the Baron's toughened nerves. He talked eagerly and for the first time I heard the details of that morning's raid

upon the city. To do him justice, disgruntled as he was, he knew how to be generous.

"No—I could not haf done more myself. Not so much perhaps. *Herr je*—they must haf thought the devil was let loose."

For it seemed that John Smith had kept his word. He had dived into the Plaza, packed with Carrenza's supporters, flattened out in the knick of time, and literally skimmed the faces of a horrified and paralysed enemy. His machine gun had played on them as coolly and deliberately as a spray of steel on some closely packed garden, beating the terrible writhing flowers to the ground in swathes.

One determined man might have brought him down. But panic set in and the disaster was complete. Impossible to say how many were crushed to death in that bestial struggle to break away into the narrow outlets of the streets. At least, Carrenza was dead. With the vanity of the true Quetzelangan, he had paraded his forces in a costume which would have befitted a prince in a musical comedy. A target not to be missed.

"Still—one determined man—one lucky shot—" the Baron murmured. "It was a risk." He leant forward talking close to my ear. "*Herr Graf,* as between men of honour—that Donna Isabella and our friend, *hein? Qu'en pensez-vous?* It's a little game he plays, I think. But one does not play with women except when one is young and a fool. It's not safe. No, I've had my fill. There was a woman I could tell you of—one of my own people—when I think of her."

The track narrowed abruptly and he had to fall back. I could hear him cursing to himself.

By daybreak we had debouched on to a so-called road—a thing of dust-filled ruts and ancient pot-holes—and had

re-formed in marching order. A queer procession came like a dream out of the soft twilight and joined with us—gangs of little trotting pedlars, women, barefoot and graceful with great swaying burdens on their dark heads, here a Spanish gentleman on horseback, his retinue shuffling at his heels, a priest, a hideous beggar by the wayside, clanging his tin and wailing in the name of God for alms. We were back in the Middle Ages and for all our machine guns and modern rifles as ancient as the rest. War or no war, revolution or no revolution, the life of the little people went its way. There had always been men among them who would kill or be killed and whoever survived would want food—iguana eggs or these fresh cool oranges, Señor. The priest blinked his bright brown eyes knowingly at us. Perhaps a mass said for some dead comrade—or for your own souls, Caballeros.

An hour later we were on the city's outskirts. No one expected an organised resistance. Its leader dead the real insurrection was at an end. But there would be a certain number too deeply compromised who would prefer to die fighting. We entered the first suburb at nine o'clock. By ten o'clock firing had ceased. But in that hour Marreno's enemies had been wiped out. In its remorselessness the massacre resembled a rat hunt. I saw men chased squealing to the edge of the flat roofs and bayoneted there, their limp bodies pitchforked over into the street gutters, or dragged out from ludicrous-tragic hiding-places, and stabbed and battered into shapeless horror. The native troops did the work. John Smith's Legionaries remained apart. Neither till that hour was over did they intervene.

Almost at the outset I broke loose. There would be no wounded. On one side was a panic too frantic even for successful self-defence, on the other a lust of killing

that even obvious death did not satiate. I sickened of the business. I gave my tired horse its head and we wandered through streets that were sometimes those of a village, sometimes of a prosperous town—cobbled roadways, trams that stood empty and forsaken, like toys dropped from the hands of frightened children, long streets of barricaded shops, and enigmatic Spanish houses, their blank closed faces seeming to breathe out a deathly silence, pretentious official buildings, stuccoed and ornate, with here and there a church left over from Colonial days, a long avenue of trees interspersed with symbolical plaster statues suggesting some stately progression, but which petered out into a huddled group of native hovels.

I came out at last on to the chief Plaza. The great Teatro Nationale flanked its southern end and faced the Presidential Palace across a generous space where flowers and trees, a gaudy band-stand and a statue to some discredited Liberator seemed the last expression of a half-haughty, half-pathetic civic pride. By the dark motionless heaps upon the ground I recognised the scene of John Smith's exploits.

I tethered my horse. Until sun-down I searched for life where there was none. The terrible exasperating wind had already covered those poor forms with a grey layer of dust so that they seemed to have been dead for many days. Gradually, as the firing ceased, figures crept out of the side-streets and skulked among the forlorn shadows, seeking too, either for booty or their own dead. They threw me furtive glances, not speaking. We were like people from different worlds.

And as I worked—uselessly enough as it proved—I wondered what a man felt who had killed like this—not in the heat of battle, nor even in self-defence, but de-

liberately, almost gaily, as a gallant gesture. And just then I looked up and saw John Smith and Marreno with a troop of mounted Legionaries ride into the Plaza. He did not see me at first. He pulled up and pointed rapidly, indicating, I gathered, his approach and method of attack. Then he rode on, letting his horse pick its way among the quiet meaningless shapes that strewed his course. And I saw his face and knew that he felt nothing—neither regret nor satisfaction—at most, impatience as with a repetition of something already finished and put behind him.

He almost rode over me, for I was busy with a man who I thought had shown a flicker of life, and I would not move. It was like an old dream come true. He spoke sharply in Spanish, then recognised me. Left to himself he would, I think, have shown that old fatal friendliness. But I stood up straight out of my litter of dead and scowled him down. And he rode past me without a sign.

2

I found refuge that night and for the strange days that followed in a quiet hotel kept and frequented by Quetzelango's English and American Colony. It became known that there was an English doctor with no axe to grind and no enemies to betray, and my time was filled with secret visits to outlying parts of the city where a few desperately wounded men lingered in hiding. For me those days were a respite—a period of release. The companionship of fellow-countrymen with their airy and humorous attitude towards the affairs of a petty Central American state, temporarily their home, seemed to give me back my perspective. The spell of San Juan was broken. I looked back upon it and on all that had happened there as upon a fantastic dream. It is true that I wanted to be-

lieve him a common blackguard, a petty adventurer who had sold his services to a petty tyrant. It made it easier.

Only the American Consul, a stout and cheerful soul who came in the evening to smoke a cigar in the patio of the Hotel James and listened to the Marimba and the day's gossip, shook his head at me.

"Yes, no doubt these revolutions are jokes—rather stale jokes. It's easy to be funny about them. I've seen twenty myself. It's like watching the antics of a volcano. You get accustomed to it. At first it all sounds mighty dangerous, but after a while you see that nothing particular happens and you turn over and go to sleep. But then one day something *does* happen—a conglomeration of chances—a new fissure there—a bit too much pressure there—and off goes the whole caboodle. This John Smith—he's a chance. But it's pretty sure he'd turn up sooner or later. Not a chance either. The thing itself. You see, out here there aren't any real people—just shadows. There's nothing to them. A puff of wind and they're gone. But the country's all right. It's virgin, but it could yield enough to buy up the rest of the world. Then what's to prevent men like this John Smith—born fighters, pioneers, and individualists who are sick of our civilisation and democracy and the whole damn dead safety of it all—coming along and putting it in their pocket?"

"There's one thing—" a young New York drummer at my elbow drawled with a comfortable conviction—"there's little old U. S. A. We've got a gunboat down at Puerto Madera now. We're watching our gentleman and when he goes too far we'll shoot him up with a ten-pounder and the Monroe Doctrine——"

The Consul snorted.

"What's your precious gunboat going to do? Sail

over the Cordilleras? The Monroe Doctrine you're so fond of isn't even a scrap of paper."

"If a darn Englishman——" the New Yorker began.

"He's not an Englishman. Not officially. He's a Quetzelangan. What are you going to do about that? We wouldn't have a leg to stand on. I tell you, if this fellow survives the delicate attentions of a jealous President, we shall have a United Central America in ten years—and no President. An Emperor perhaps with an aristocracy of European and United States freebooters and a bran new Feudal System applied to the Quetzelangans who maybe aren't fit for much else."

The New Yorker found all this high-flown and exaggerated. Things like that didn't happen nowadays—couldn't happen. The world had done with Emperors and high-lights of that sort. Democracy wouldn't stand for it.

"This John Smith, as they call him, he'll be snuffed out. And serve him right. His wife's another proposition—I'm darned sorry for her. Poor little girl. A real peach—and sweet too, I'd bet my life. No joke being yoked up with a hell-for-leather fellow like that."

"A lot you know," the Consul murmured, ironically. "At any rate, she'll have lived. That's something unusual in itself—though you mightn't think so. I daresay he makes a great lover."

"I bet he does. What about the Donna Isabella?"

"Well, you can't marry Napoleon and expect to live like—I was going to say—like Mrs. John Smith."

The New Yorker jeered. His hard colourless voice drawled on to the accompaniment of the melodious tinkling of the Marimba among the orange trees. But he had grown dim and blurred as though a mist had crept in and covered my eyes.

"I've known her," I said at last, "all my life.'

No more than that. But they looked at me gravely and though nothing had been said to hurt her, yet there was a sort of regret and apology in their silence. I got up suddenly and left them.

3

Aunt Geraldine was dead.

I came upon the announcement in an English newspaper several weeks old so that she had died soon after I had left England. It was like the fall of a fine old buttress that had held my life together. She had always been there. It was incredible that I should never see her again. In my first grief I wished that I had wanted Old Stoneborough and fought for it as she had done. Even that much would have made her happy. But I had gone on new ways and it had broken her heart.

I thought of Miss Cornelious, alone in that faded, shabby house, wandering through the rooms where those two had spent their lives and grown together, picking up the little familiar things that had dropped from my aunt's tired old hands.

Nothing left. Nothing in the whole world.

What? Not one last adventure, Corny? A real one this time—a gallant quest—a Corny to the rescue! Suppose I sound the trumpet-call in your ear?

There was just one chance: that, old and heartbroken as she was, she would answer. And if she came the burden would be lifted. Lisbeth would never have to see me again.

The British Consul sent my cable for me. But already the city had resumed its normal activities and almost its normal appearance. A few shot-pitted walls, a

dark stain on a pavement, parties of indifferent native police carrying the body of some poor devil who had crawled like a dying rat into an obscure hole and who was now no more to anyone than an untidy unwieldy package to be added to the common grave outside the city—these were the last signs, too familiar in themselves to excite more than a passing interest. But there remained an atmosphere of excitement, of tense and almost ecstatic hope. Decies with his two hundred white troops had routed Carrenza's foreign army that after his death had lodged itself in the mountains, and prisoners and booty were pouring into the city. An ultimatum had been sent to Nicaragua, demanding reparations for a wanton act of aggression on the part of its citizens. It was said that a thousand recruits for John Smith's Legion with arms and munitions were already streaming into Puerto Madero. At the street corners groups talked passionately and mysteriously to one another and one caught the words "A new era—a new era." But these were the men of Spanish origin in whose blood some of the old hot pride still burned. The natives, and they were ten to one, went on their apathetic way. For them it was one more change of masters.

Lisbeth and Donna Isabella came down in state from San Juan and a fierce holiday-making crowd, that a few days before would have been ready to tear them to pieces, took the horses out of their carriage and bore them to the President's Palace amidst huzzas of delirious enthusiasm. I saw her pass, sitting beside that dark, unsmiling woman, herself so very fair and frail that I turned sick at heart. I knew by the faint contraction of the brows how strange and bewildering all this was to her. Perhaps she remembered that less than four years ago she had been Lisbeth Gay and lived in Stoneborough, in that drowsy age-mel-

lowed tranquillity, and wondered what had happened and whether this was just one of Miss Corny's wild stories that had crept into a dream. A very splendid dream such as might have stirred a colder imagination than hers. She must have known, of course, that men had been killed, but when she drove into the Plaza she did not see their bodies. Would it have mattered if she had? After all, she had been brought up with a soldier's creed. Killing was a part of fighting, and fighting was noble. She must have forgotten that night in the stifling prison-hovel. He had blotted it from her memory with one spectacular gesture. And yet over that dying victim she had looked at me strangely, like a blind woman seeing for the first time.

That day General John Smith gave thanks to God for victory, in the Cathedral. He went alone. It was said with a significant shrug that Marreno was ill—more likely sulking or unwilling to put his own popularity to the test. I had not meant to witness the ceremony, but at the last moment a curiosity stronger than my distaste drove me to join the crowd that surged through the streets to greet their hero. He came very simply in civilian clothes, without escort. He made no appeal to their tastes, and, indeed, seeing his face for a moment as he went, hat in hand, up the Cathedral steps, I believe that he was honestly unconscious of them. No victorious saint could have worn an expression more lofty, more wrapt in the conviction of a high and unswerving destiny. But the old look of a laughing peace with God was gone. In the full sunlight I recognised a certain haggardness, not of years or fatigue, but of a man in the thick of a vital struggle which he dared not lose.

The undisciplined mob caught me in its swirl and swept me with it through the wide doors into a vast cave

full of sound and darkness. Over the blackly tossing surface I could see the star-like altar lights, the dim glitter of vestments, and out of a slowly rolling cloud of incense, a shadowy and lonely figure. It was as though I had been carried back a thousand years. Or else there was something here that was fundamental—eternal.

And then, inconsequently enough, I remembered the little intimate chapel, the two *prie-dieu* set side by side, with an almost childlike simplicity, symbolic not, after all, of a spiritual companionship but of a hope, a purpose.

The organ boomed sullenly overhead. He knelt. And for me his splendid isolation became tragic.

That is one picture that I have of him. Then again I see him at the Fiesta in the market-place, still unattended, fighting gaily through a clamouring, sweating crowd. Unless it was true, as Lisbeth had said, that some charm protected him, he risked his life. There must have been more than one man who pressed against him with his hand on his revolver. And he was an alien, in his English fairness, in his every action. His casualness should have confused and antagonised these people, accustomed to a spectacular tyranny. At a wooden booth, where a Marimba tinkled for the hotly dancing couples, he seized upon a pretty little native girl, who watched wistfully, and whirled her down the boarded floor, smiling into her abashed deliciously bewildered face. The old mood had overtaken him—the same light-hearted trust in himself and his own rightness that had made him laugh into the eyes of that woman-pirate at the very moment of death. And now, as then, he was justified. He won. He flouted every preconception of a leader, knocked over their prejudices with an easy mockery. And they followed him, laughed with him, exulting in his unexpectedness, fascinated by his utter disregard of them.

A wandering French company gave a gala performance of "Le Cidre" that night at the Teatro Nationale. It was to be the culminating celebration. Two days before the Quetzelangan troops had driven the last invader over the borders and a national pride as easily kindled to white hot fury as crushed into a grey subjection made the occasion one for an overweening display. It would have been easy to have imagined oneself in a Berlin Opera House on a night of victory. The flamboyant red and gold building flickered with the colours of gaudy uniforms amidst which the black mantillas of the heavy and over-jewelled women struck like a sensuous and provocative note of music. The proscenium and presidential box were overgrown with flowers. At intervals a second-rate orchestra broke into some national air and the audience swept to its feet, shouting and gesticulating.

I had taken my place in the crowd that lined the sides of the stalls opposite the presidential box. I was resigned now to my part in this drama. And at the bottom—I know it now, I would not have owned it then—I came because the pain of seeing her was the only happiness left me. And as I stood there, waiting with the thickly beating heart of a young lover, a hand laid itself on my arm. I turned to meet the Baron's friendly and villainous grin.

"And the joke of it is," he said in my ear, "that half these pretty fellows would haf gone over to Carrenza on that very morning. That's their way. Like the wind. You cannot blame the wind. But if you want to get anywhere you must use steam. Na, we are the steam."

And he laughed and ran his bloodshot brown eyes over the crowd with a frank contempt. He himself made a striking figure enough in the pale blue uniform of a German Dragoon Regiment and his great chest glittered with

German orders. He must have felt my curiosity, for he looked down on the display and patted it affectionately with a broad powerful hand.

"I am a Quetzelangan," he said, "but I was once in the Cavalry—before I took to flying—and sometimes in a half-breed mob like this, I like to remember that I was once a good German."

He put his finger to his lips. The leader of the orchestra had turned towards us, baton in hand. It was the signal. The audience was on its feet again, this time in straining silence. I saw Donna Isabella enter the box opposite. She paused a moment, looking down on us, half-curious, half-contemptuous, then seated herself drawing her mantilla closer about her with an arrogant calm. Reluctantly, she had made way to the woman behind her.

Well, he had kept his word. I knew that she had never desired nor chosen those jewels—not even the dress, marvellously like her though it was in its simplicity and golden richness. There were emeralds in her sunny hair and on the womanly tender hand that rested half closed against her breast in that old unconscious gesture of a child's innocent wonder.

The Baron whispered thickly:

"Eine Märchenprinzessin, nicht wahr? He sent for that dress to Paris. She makes the Donna Isabella look like a black angry crow. *Passen Sie auf*—now you shall hear something."

For all that time there had been no sound. It was a tribute to his power over the people's imagination that, volatile and impatient as they were, they should have stood there motionless for a full minute before he came. I saw him dimly at first. He seemed to come out of a distant obscurity like an old portrait from a faded background and to look down upon that seething mass with

an impenetrable remoteness. Remote and alone. There was no kinship between him and these people. They were his tools—nothing more. Perhaps they knew it. At least, he knew and the knowledge may have had a bitter flavour. But for once he had humoured them. He wore the uniform of their First Infantry Regiment—as the Baron shouted to me—and he gave its blue and gold extravagance an unchallengable dignity. He stood at the front of the box, his hands crossed upon his sword hilt, and accepted the shouted tributes without sign either of impatience or satisfaction. He was paler than his wont and his eyes were fixed steadily on some far-off point beyond the white upturned faces. Did he for a moment look back—say, at Lizzy Smith's little sweet-shop in the High Street or on those ragamuffin days when he had stolen like a thief through the haunted galleries of old Stoneborough? I did not think so—or if he did, it must have been as upon a period as unreal and fantastic as was this scene to me. To him this was the reality. The rest—the poverty, the hardships, the apparent helplessness—must have seemed like a play in which he had acted his part—not carelessly, for no man with such a purpose can afford to bungle even the least detail of his life—but with a secret imperious laughter.

"Viva il Liberator—viva il General—viva—viva!"

I saw Lisbeth suddenly stretch out her hand and lay it upon his. This scene which seemed to express a passionate gratitude must have moved her profoundly. It justified him. It reconciled them. And at that touch I could have sworn that the blood rushed up into his set face and that he sighed deeply.

"Viva—viva!"

He turned. He made a gesture towards Marreno who stood beside him. He may have had a sincere desire to

turn the enthusiasm from himself. If so, he failed. The Latin-American has no pity.

"No—no—*il General—il Liberator*——"

Then in one of those sudden lulls which fall upon mob fury a man's voice rang out. I could not hear the words. The mere sound was an insult.

There was one thing to be said for Marreno. He had courage—self-control of a sort. He gave no sign. His expressionlessness was deadly. I heard the Baron click his tongue.

"*Ça y est.* He won't swallow that. So much the better."

The next instant he had me by the arm in a grip so fierce that it made me turn sharp round. The man's face had undergone a terrible change. The good-humour which made its ugliness not unlikable had been wiped out. He looked bestial. The thick lips were thrown out in an expression that was horrible in its greedy cruelty. I followed his eyes. The orchestra had broken into the national anthem, and over the heads of the audience, temporarily at rest, I recognised her. She stood on a line with us, nearer to the stage, gazing up into the President's box. She was unchanged. For all the gaudy evening dress and air of reckless well-being the something weather-beaten and tired and insatiable which had moved me to a strange pity still lingered about her. She was smiling to herself—as she had smiled that evening—with irony and anger, but with pity and admiration too. The generous, violent face was tremulous. At a touch perhaps she would have burst into a fit of crying—or into a fit of large-hearted laughter.

So she too had beaten her way through. Somehow. And now John Smith could look to himself.

An officer of Marreno's army had her by the arm.

And he was watching her and smiling too, with a deliberate, open desire that stript her naked. That wouldn't hurt her now—hadn't hurt her, perhaps, since that time in Brussels when he had left her to save herself—anyway, or not at all. She had a right to her disaster. And if Lisbeth went down too, that couldn't be helped. That was the way things happened. Nobody had cared whether *she* was innocent or not. Innocence didn't save you.

The Baron had let go his hold on me. He was making strange groaning sounds in his throat as though he were trying to curse and couldn't. Then without a word of explanation or farewell he broke from me, kicking and elbowing his way through the crowd with a violence that roused a swirl of resentment in his track. Perhaps the angry murmur drew her attention to the huge figure battling towards her. At any rate, as though warned, she turned quickly, spoke to her companion, and they were gone before the German could reach them. A fresh inrush of people checked his pursuit. I saw him standing there, staring about him like a maddened, baffled animal.

4

I went to him. And it was typical of the man, that though the gilded pretentious ante-room was full of officers and officials who had been kicking their heels in wait for him for hours, he received me instantly. He even rose from the littered table where he had been working and offered me his hand, and when I ignored it, the eyes—more penetratingly blue and living than ever in that tanned and haggard setting—considered me with a quizzical kindliness.

"I think it's foolish of you to feel like that, Fitzroy. After all—we can't help ourselves."

I found myself stammering in a sort of sullen ludicrous self-defence.

"You nearly rode me down in the Plaza the other night. At least you wanted to——"

"No—really," he protested. "I didn't recognise you. I was frightfully tired. I had been two days and nights without sleep and I had to watch Marreno like a cat. Afterwards—well, you looked so damned obstinate and disapproving." He laughed and I felt the blood rush to my face. "By the way, what do you disapprove of, Fitzroy? Life? God? You've got all sorts of vague notions about pity, haven't you? But look here——" He took me by the arm and led me to the window that overlooked the patio. "Those are Marreno's quarters. I'm sharing house with him at present, ostensibly to be in close communication, really so that we can keep an eye on one another. Well, if you were to stand here long enough you would notice that though everything seems very much asleep *il Señor Presidente* receives visitors. They are very unobtrusive. But they are weaving all kinds of little schemes for my benefit. Assassination, perhaps. But Marreno would prefer to be a hero. And he'd like to catch me alive and do to me what he did to Alvarez before he died. So it's more likely he'll try fighting. He's utterly irreconcilable—ambitious without brains or character. Obstacles like that have to be cleared out of the road, Fitzroy. There's no other way to build up an empire in this world. God knows that as well as I do."

"Why should you build up an empire?" I retorted.

"Because it is the will of God."

There was no answer to that except to say that he was

either mad or consciously blaspheming, and neither taunt was true. Nor did I want to taunt him. As he stood there, looking out into the sunlight, I felt sick at heart —heavy with that same vague pity of which he had accused me.

"Well—since we're not friends, what is it you want?"

"Paula is here," I answered.

He gave no sign—except perhaps, I thought, of a faintly admiring amusement.

"How do you know?"

"I saw her last night at the Theatre."

"Have you come to warn me?"

"I had to."

"Why? Why not let the storm burst?"

"You know why. Because it would burst over Lisbeth. It's an incredible situation—but until she is out of danger I have no choice but to take your part," I broke out involuntarily. "I'm afraid for her."

"There's no need," he retorted haughtily. "Whoever else is in danger, she is safe."

I laughed.

"You talk about God's will. One would think that you were God. Don't you—or won't you—realise the danger she is in?"

"Are you speaking as a doctor?"

"Even if I wasn't a doctor I should see how frail she is."

He went back to his place at the littered table and sat down. Though the slender beautiful hands were clasped, he could not and perhaps did not try to control their trembling. Another man, hard hit before an open enemy, would have laughed and acted a fine self-confidence. But in all fundamentals he had never acted. And there was a queer moving pathos in his open fear for her.

"Of course I've seen. Fitzroy"—he leant towards me, his strange eyes seeming to draw me against my will into a profound intimacy—"she's terrible and pitiable too, isn't she? You've known her all her life—better than I do. You know what I mean. So frail, as you say, so very frail. Anything might break her—a blow, a sudden shock. She might die when her baby comes. That's what's in your mind all the time, isn't it? That's why you don't shoot me or go about telling the world the sort of fellow you think I am. And yet I'm powerless beside her. Obstinate—or strong? I don't know. But there's something here"—he laid his hand against his breast—"something fine—that I can't move—perhaps that I don't want to move. And yet it might break my life."

I looked away from him. It was intolerable that he should lay himself bare to me. It was disarming. I had to say to myself, "This man is a murderer who has betrayed not only the woman you love but many women —beyond forgiveness," and even then could feel nothing but a dull disbelief. And as though he knew the thought that were passing through my mind, he asked gently:

"You know I love her?"

"Yes." I answered with bitter truth. "I believe you do."

That seemed to be all he wanted, for a moment afterwards he went on with a cool matter-of-factness.

"So that you and I have got to pull together. As regards Paula, I could have her arrested and sent out of the country. But I couldn't stop her talking and I have enemies enough to spread the news. It would be best for you to see her." He saw my flash of incredulous resentment and went on deliberately. "I am not afraid of her. If you must, you can bring her here. But take

a message from me first. Ask her what she wants. I am not personally rich in money, but I could raise enough to satisfy her. I am prepared to buy her off—at any rate until Lisbeth is out of danger. But if she has come here to make trouble or to demand impossibilities——" His voice dropped and became dangerous. "Explain to her that I have unlimited power here. Tell her that Lisbeth is my wife. Anyone who attempts to touch her position I shall simply stamp out. I can do it and I will." He began to pace the room. I believe that a thought came into his mind which he banished at once, but not utterly. He added in a changed tone, "I do not want that to happen. I always liked Paula. She has more courage in her little finger than ten men and we had great days together. Tell her I have not forgotten."

He took it for granted that I should go. And I remember looking him up and down, feeling my helplessness, and wondering why to heaven I couldn't loathe him.

"I'm just another tool to you," I said.

He smiled.

"A very fractious one. Well, I don't see that that is a matter for reproach, is it? Tools are a damned necessity. Even a Raphael had to have a paint-box, I suppose. If I could do without other men—and women—I would. You can be sure of that. As to Paula and I—we would simply strike sparks out of one another. And even you don't want a conflagration at the moment."

"How shall I find her?"

"I shall find her for you. I have spies everywhere—even in Marreno's camp. Give me your address. I will let you know immediately."

"Suppose I fail?"

"You won't. But in any case I shall send Lisbeth up

to Chivaga, out of reach. All this turmoil is bad for her. I know that as well as you do."

"Wherever you are, there will be turmoil. Your life is made up of nothing else."

He shrugged rather scornfully.

"You mean that wherever there is action there is violence. Well, action is life. Those volcanoes out there —when they are dead and cold this earth will be so much nearer its end. They have destroyed people and cities. So shall I perhaps. It's inevitable. It has always been inevitable."

"In the end you will destroy Lisbeth too."

He turned full on me. His face was white but perfectly expressionless.

"I suppose you are trying to shake my faith in myself. You should know me better. And you're paying Lisbeth a poor compliment. She's big—bigger than you are—I have made her happy—and I shall make her happy. Don't delude yourself, Fitzroy. She made no mistake. I'm her man as no one else could have been. When she has her child—when all this is over—she will see clearly that I had no choice. The things that fret her now will fall into their place. That is——" Suddenly the colour poured into his face like a released tide and I realised that he had been speaking under a violent restraint. "—unless you have so poisoned her mind—so blinded her with your own damned and trivial vision."

I was too startled to answer, and in a moment his whole aspect had changed again. The charm of that contrition was like a flood of generous warmth breaking over me. I can feel now the conscious and deliberately exerted strength of his fascination. He put his arm over my shoulder and for the life of me I could not have shaken myself free.

"There! You're the very devil, Fitzroy. You've made me sorry. And I've never been sorry about anything. Of course, I trust you, damn you. I believe you want the best, even for me. That's why I'm afraid you'll make a mess of things. You honest, unselfish people are more dangerous than an army of lunatics."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked grimly. "Tell Lisbeth—and try and catch her on the rebound for myself?"

"Well, at least, I could fight you then—" he retorted. "As it is—I suppose if you could get me married to her according to your own trumpery little laws, you would thank God and go in peace."

That seemed so obvious that I did not answer and he sighed and said something under his breath about "fighting a mist." But after that our conversation became purely formal. I was to find Paula and persuade her to silence, threaten her if necessary, and bring him the result at the President's reception that night.

"Tell her," he said finally, "that what she does in the end is of no interest to me. The ceremony I went through with her was a convenience to both of us and nothing more. She knows that. Her time for bargaining is short."

I remembered Paula and wondered, but I said nothing and we parted abruptly. On the threshold of the antechamber I ran into the Baron. But he was quarrelling with a Quetzelangan official and did not even see me. His great voice boomed through the crowded room, thick and shaken with anger.

"But I must speak to him—I must. You *verfluchte dago* swine—tell him that I saw her and that I will not be responsible."

And then as I looked back I saw him catch his oppo-

nent by the collar and swing him off his feet and toss him into the gaping crowd like an importunate cur. He himself went striding down the corridor toward the General's room and even the armed sentry did not attempt to stop him.

5

I suppose Paula had been in that room only a few days at most and already it was pitifully like herself. Some restless spirit might have been through its contents with a pitchfork, tossing one garment after another in search of it did not know what, and she sat in the ensuing chaos, baffled but resigned. I think she would have liked to be tidy just as she would have liked to rest a little and I had an absurd immediate impulse to clear things up for her, sweep the mess out of sight, put a cushion behind her tousled head, to pet and console her like an overtired, unhappy child. It is difficult to explain how a woman so reckless and immoral should have excited a feeling of compassionate tenderness. But so it was.

I never knew what had happened to her in those few weeks. But the weariness of them was written all over the wrecked beauty of her face. Physically, she was better fed, better clothed than when I had seen her last. Spiritually, she was at the bitter end of everything. She had the look of having been plunged in a degradation so unbearable that she shrank from herself with a kind of nervous horror.

She received me like a friend, holding my hand between her two strong ones and smiling at me, a flicker of an old gamin gaiety at the corners of her full mouth.

"It's like being home," she explained. "Not that I haf ever had a home. But I think home must be where someone has been nice to you—really nice. You were nice,

you know. Perhaps you did not mean to be. It just slipped out."

She pushed a heap of frowsy clothes off a chair to make room for me and sat opposite at a cosmetic-littered table, her face between her hands, watching me with her haggard eyes. "Somehow I knew I'd find you here. Hard hit, weren't you? She might haf been your sister or—na, nefer mind that. Don't get angry before you haf said 'How do you do.' Tell me, when did you come? By the next boat?"

I told her and she nodded.

"It took me longer. I had to work my passage. We won't talk about that, you nice respectable Englishman. But I said I'd do it, didn't I? How did you find me out?"

"I saw you at the Theatre."

"Star-gazing? *Grosse Gott!* What a night! And to think how I first met him. Do you know, I couldn't make up my mind whether to shoot him—and I had a revolver and I can shoot—or cry over him. *Etwas ruhrend, nicht wahr?* I don't know what."

"Perhaps there's always something sad about a man getting what he wants."

"P'raps. Anyhow I didn't do either. I saw someone I didn't particularly care to meet and I bolted. Did you follow?"

"No."

"Then how did you know where I lived?"

"I told the General I had seen you and he gave me your address."

Her eyes dropped. I could tell by her mouth and the tense clenching of her hand that already we had reached the end of our friendly parley. We took our places, as it were, *en garde.*

"So he sent you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"He thought it wiser not to."

"He was afraid."

"Yes—I think so—a little—of both of you."

"I'd like to believe it. He didn't care. It was easier to send someone else. It saved time. What did he tell you to say?"

"I was to ask what you wanted."

At that she laughed loudly and ironically.

"Lots of things. I will tell you presently. Perhaps just to see him—to talk over old times—Brussels, for instance, and that dear old General who saved my life for me. That might amuse him."

"Don't you see yourself that no good could come of such a meeting? You're frightfully bitter. Heaven knows you have a right to be. But you know him as well as I do and that he sticks at nothing. He won't spare you or anyone else who gets in his way. And this isn't England."

"He sent you to threaten me then?"

"Partly."

"And you let yourself do dirty work like that?"

"Imagine that he has the power to make me——"

"I won't imagine anything so stupid. You've got reasons of your own."

"Yes—that's true."

"You've come to get me to hold my tongue. A few weeks ago you wouldn't have offered me sixpence. You said sooner or later it would come out."

"It mustn't come out now."

"Why not? What's your game? Go on—out with it. Everyone's got a game with me—and no one cares a

curse what becomes of my end of it. Always—always it's been like that—ever since I was a kid—fighting claws and teeth—just to keep alive." Whether she knew it or not, she had been pleading, explaining, apologising. Now she broke loose. She banged the table with her clenched fist. Her face became ugly with all the ugliness of her life. She fairly screamed at me. "Well—I can look after myself now and by God I will. I'm his wife. I rather fancy myself sitting up there in that box with him. Those emeralds would suit me. That Lisbeth of his—she's young and pretty, but with a bit of paint I'd look well enough from a distance. He won't haf to be ashamed. Tell him I'd like being *Señora Presidente* or whatefer it is. Tell him——"

"It's no use," I interrupted. "He won't acknowledge you. You could tear his world down about his ears and you wouldn't move him. His wife——"

"Ah—his wife!"

"Let that pass for once. She is his wife in my eyes—perhaps in yours—certainly in his. Give him his due. He's mad and bad, if you like, but his marriage to you meant nothing to him. It was a form—a convenience to you both. You needed each other's help."

I wasn't being honest and my dishonesty was a bad blunder. She sprang to her feet, looking down on me with a boundless passion of resentment.

"It's a lie. I've been about with men—I'm a bad lot—But I wouldn't haf married him—not to save him or me or this whole filthy world unless I had cared. And if you think that's damn nonsense it's because you're a damn fool."

"I'm not a damn fool anyway," I said and sat still, looking back steadily into her distorted face. "And now I'll tell you my truth too. I don't care about John Smith

—or even about myself. I'm terribly sorry for you. But it's Lisbeth I'm thinking of. She's going to have a child. She's not strong and if she hears this now—well, it might make all the difference. That's why I've come. You see, I was to have married her once. And I love her."

I had gambled on a chance and had lost. She was like an instrument that had been so violently misused that no one could judge any more whether the notes struck would bring out harmony or a hideous jangle. And the thought of Lisbeth bearing his child may have been the last intolerable hurt. The ragged bonds which still held her personality together seemed to fly asunder and from the window where she had taken refuge she bore down upon me, distraught, menacing.

"I don't care either—not for the whole pack of you. You're beasts. All of you. I'll tell you what I want—and you can tell him. I want my rights—my rights—my rights. I've been down in the muck. He helped to put me there. He squeezed me down in it. And now if it oozes out of my bones—out of my eyes and mouth—that's his lookout."

I cut her short.

"You're only running yourself into danger. He's too strong for you."

"Is he—is he? We'll see. I hafn't been in a war for nothing. It's not always the big guns. You find the other side's weak link. And I've found his. I'm not going to him. I'm going to this Lisbeth—straight—" She laughed wildly. "Ah, that gets you, doesn't it? Men and their fine chivalry. Oh, yes—their own women—that's one thing—but the other women—nobody's women—kick them into the gutter to make way for our fine ladies—You think—what's it matter? She's lost anyway—a bit more or less won't count—offer her money—

threaten her—she's used to it. Well, so I am. But now I'm fed up—and you can clear out—and tell him so."

I think she meant to show me out with a magnificent gesture of rage and scorn. But instead she sat down opposite me and began to cry. She cried like a man, heavily, terribly, and almost tearlessly, as though the channel of tears had long since been walled up and had to be broken down stone by stone. And I could do nothing. I dared not even lay my hand on hers. There was a sort of bigness about her that forbade a trivial gesture of compassion. And though I still pleaded with her it was without hope.

"Be fair to me, at any rate. I didn't come here to threaten you. I wouldn't ask you for anything that would hurt you—not even to save Lisbeth. That wouldn't be fair to her. I only asked you for time—to hold your hand for a few weeks. I've told you why I asked. I thought perhaps—if you knew—well, that I had nothing to gain either—that I'd had my share of pain."

She looked up at me. Her eyes were dry now and very hard and bright. For a moment she had attained a pose of curious detachment.

"I'm sorry—yes, I am—sorry I'm not sorry anyhow. I daresay a few years back—say before the Brussels episode—I'd haf given in. But you see, I'm messed up—altogether. I'm smashed. There's nothing left for me but to smash up everyone else. There was a fellow called Samson. You may haf heard of him. When they made things too beastly for him he just pulled their damned temple about their ears and got himself decently buried in the ruins. That's what I'm going to do."

I saw what she meant. It was tragic and futile enough. A sort of grandeur in the end—a magnificent climax that would give her back her self-respect—cover her rotten,

squandered life with a memorial pile of disaster. And I saw, too, that she was immovable. I got up and she rose with me, not without dignity.

"Go in and marry her," she said. "Don't be a fool."

"It's you who are the fool," I answered.

She made a face.

"I've nefer met decent people," she said. "I don't belief there are any. I don't belief in you. That's the trouble. I did—at first. I thought—oh, well—I thought you'd just come to say 'How d'you do.' But after all—you only wanted something. You're like the rest."

So that was it. Not John Smith or even Lisbeth, but just that for a moment she had believed in a disinterested kindliness and been mistaken. And I was as ashamed as though I had struck her across her unguarded face—too ashamed even to say good-bye or look at her. But as I passed her she laid her hand on my arm.

"Marreno's smarter than you'd think," she said. "He's a snake. Tell John Smith to look out."

And then violently she slammed the door.

V

1

HE had given careful orders concerning me. From the stream of uniformed men that eddied and swirled noisily through the vestibule I was picked out by an officer of his Legion and led through empty passages and up a broad stairway to a colonnade that overlooked the patio. The place was very quiet and dark. The slender Moorish columns made a frame for a tranquil picture of starlight and low flat roofs above which a palm tree lifted a dream-like silhouette. I could hear music and voices, but they were dim and far-off and only deepened my sense of having stepped into a strange world where reality itself became unreal and fancies were the very stuff of life. A faint, bewildering scent of orange-blossom floated up from the hidden garden. Involuntarily, I hushed my own footsteps, even my guide spoke in an undertone.

I was to wait there. The General would be with me in a few minutes. Then the man was gone—like a stone dropped into a black pool. I remained where he had left me, motionless as the shadow of the column which seemed to blot me out, glad to be lost for a little in that mysterious peace. For I, too, had attained peace of a sort. That interview with Paula had been like a bitter ascent to a new height of understanding. I saw now that there comes a point beyond which no human being can help another—where each of us must stand for himself. I had wanted to shield Lisbeth and I had been wrong.

In a way I had wronged her. As John Smith had said, she was big enough to carry her own burden and I had had no right to try to take it from her. Even if the knowledge of his treachery bore down her physical strength and killed her, spiritually she would remain unshaken. And that, after all, was what really mattered. I suppose the truth is that I had given up the idea of happiness altogether. I had given it up for myself long since and now I gave up her, too. Happiness wasn't our concern. It was a sort of will-o'-the-wisp that led nowhere, except perhaps to misery and disgrace. To have lived bravely and straightly, not to have funked one's ditches—that was a man's consolation at the end. It didn't matter so much when or how the end came so long as he could think that of himself. And Lisbeth wouldn't funk. She was safe from the only real disaster.

And so now I could think of her without restraint, with infinite tenderness, as a fellow traveller. Just because I had given up all claims on life, even for her, I had become free. And with this inner and absolute freedom had come peace.

I heard the soft opening of a door. So naked were my sensibilities at that moment that I knew before I saw her. I would have known had I been blind. She came, quiet as a shadow to the verge of the colonnade and stood looking out into the night, one hand resting on the base of a stone column like a white fallen flower. She did not see me, motionless in the dark, and just then, at least, I could not have moved. For to me she was the loveliness of all lovely things. She was human goodness itself and the sight of her was consolation and reassurance. If, indeed, we have struggled up from some poor ape, then to look at her, so upright, so generous, so kindly, and so wise with some fine wisdom of her own, was to know

how far we had come and how nothing was impossible to us. Because of her I believed in some ultimate and perfect fulfilment.

It is true I loved her. But love is not blind. It is visionary.

She looked very young. The dark smoothed out the lines which had been drawn too soon under her eyes. And yet she was not a girl—not the Lisbeth who had been my playmate. The grave face lifted to the starlight was full of a knowledge that touched me to the heart—of premonition as though she stood proud and prepared, but wistful too, before the disclosing of some final mystery.

I spoke her name. She turned, not with a start, but quietly, as though she and I had been there a long time together, lost in thought, and my voice had just recalled her. Her eyes were black and undecipherable. She could not have read mine. Yet we stood there, gazing at one another steadfastly, and I knew that the old barrier between us was gone.

"Did I frighten you, Lisbeth?"

"No. I was thinking of Stoneborough. It seemed natural—I almost knew."

"I came here to meet your husband. I thought you would be down there—somewhere in all that crowd."

"He didn't want me to come. He thinks I'm not strong. It isn't that. Really, I'm very strong, you know. But I was glad to be quiet. I thought it would be nice to be alone and listen to the music. It was the music that made me think of Stoneborough."

Perhaps she was remembering that night when we had walked home from the Assembly Rooms with the last waltz that we had danced together singing in our ears. Perhaps, I, too, seemed young again in that half light—just a boy.

"It's hard to believe it's the same world."

"The stars are the same—everywhere."

"I suppose sad people have been comforted by that thought all down the ages—Lisbeth."

I had meant to speak lightly. But though I had passed beyond the reach of hope, I was very pitifully human. And memory got my heart between its claws, and my voice fell and betrayed me. I felt her draw back from me. But not in anger. In some strange way we were both too far removed from life. We were talking to one another like people who were dead.

"Why do you stay on, Euan? This is such an unhappy country. I don't think there's anyone really happy."

"Not even—John Smith? He must have almost everything he ever dreamed of in Old Stoneborough."

"It means so much suffering, Euan."

"Inevitable suffering. And after all—it *is* an unhappy country. Suffering is nothing new. In the end he may bring peace."

She did not answer for a moment.

"I think peace is a long way off. This is only the beginning. I think real peace would be the end for him, Euan."

"Well—but he will make peace for you. He told me—you are going to Chivaga, aren't you? There are only English and Americans there. It will be like home."

Then I saw her hands and that they were trembling.

"I'm so afraid."

"Lisbeth."

"Oh—not of things—not of these people. Though, of course, sooner or later they will try to do us harm. I'm thinking of my baby, Euan. It's terrible to bring anyone into such a world—with people killing and hating one another. It isn't fair."

"But, Lisbeth—fighting is life. You used to think so."

She smiled as though she were trying not to let me see that she was crying secretly.

"I've been all round life since then. I wasn't just. I was unjust to you. I've meant to tell you so—often—but it has been too difficult. I thought you were weak and cowardly. It was the War. And men glorify such strange things. I hope my baby will be a little girl, Euan."

She hardly knew what she was saying—least of all that she was saying it to me. I was the shadow of someone whom she had trusted. And her heart was too full. "I see what you meant now. And that's why I want you to go away. I mustn't see if I'm to go on. And you make me see."

"I wish I had never had to come," I answered. "I wish I could go. But I'm not free."

She turned full on me, challenging me with her own loyalty and truth.

"What is it, Euan? I've always known there was something I didn't understand. Can't you tell me?"

That was not possible. Not yet. I was bound by a strange sense of loyalty to him. He himself, I knew, had never hesitated before any treachery that was necessary to his ambitions. Still if I had struck him suddenly, without warning, he would have made me ashamed. So I told her a part truth. I told of the fugitives whose wounds I was attending secretly. I distracted her attention to the story of a mere boy, the son of a rich Quetzelangan family, who was dying in an outlying native hovel and whose mother knew and dared not come to him, lest her husband should be compromised. Even in that half light I saw the passionate generous colour rush up into her cheeks.

"But she must see him. What difference can it make? A mere child—I will ask my husband."

And there she faltered and the colour was gone again. That hour by the tortured little Quetzelangan soldier rose between us like an ironic spectre. "He would give me the whole world," she exclaimed passionately, "but not that."

"He can't," I said. "If a man sets out to conquer a whole world, he must put mercy and even justice behind him. Perhaps if his ends are great enough he is justified."

She turned to look at me with a strange pathetic little smile.

"You are very fair, Euan. And a man too, for all that. Even you perhaps could get lost in an abstract principle which would let you do incredible things. Being a woman is different. I should always have to think of life first."

"Is that the most important thing?"

"Yes," she said, "the most important."

A silence fell upon us. It brought us so close to one another that I was afraid. I began to talk of other things —of Stoneborough, my aunt's death, my work in the mining village. I suppose I must have been coherent enough. But all the time I was listening for John Smith's step on the colonnade. I felt that the peace had gone. A tension, a sense of an impending calamity, was in the quiet. I had a compelling desire to get Lisbeth away from this place at all costs. But she seemed unconscious of any change. She listened with a grave attentiveness.

"I think you, at any rate, must be happy, Euan."

I could not have answered and she understood and asked, "Can't you forget me?" with a sort of desperate sorrowfulness. I shook my head.

"I don't want to. I'm all right. I've work that satisfies me. If I knew that everything was well with you I could go in peace."

"But it is—it is. It must be. Why, I have everything. Wealth, position—love, too. I don't think many women can be so much loved as I am, Euan. He has a sort of genius for it. And perhaps if I had lived three hundred years I could have given it back with all my heart and soul. But—oh, I don't know. Perhaps it isn't wise for a woman to have thoughts of her own."

"But if they are the thoughts of a new race," I said haltingly, "if it is because you have begun to dream your own dreams that we have become ashamed——"

She made a little movement. I guessed that she had seen something beneath in the darkness that I had not seen. A door opened, letting through a flood of light on to the garden and as swiftly closed again. A man passed rapidly between the arches. I recognised him and even as I did so a woman's figure disengaged itself from the shadow and went to meet him. I fancy he made some gesture of warning—of angry impatience. The next minute they were merged together. In the hot stillness I could hear the murmur of her voice, thick, shaken with passion.

That was the disaster then. I must have felt her, like an evil thing, lurking there in the darkness, waiting. My impulse was to throw myself in front of Lisbeth, to cover her eyes with my hand. But it was too late. She had seen. And for all my love she seemed to me at that moment as tragically alone as dying people are. I could not help her. Only in my imagination could I go down with her into the bitterness of that revelation.

She gave no sign at all. Her fine spirit answered to the challenge instantly, leaping like a flame to its full

height. She turned. Her eyes demanded no less from me. Her voice was level.

"I think I will go back now, Euan. My rooms are quite close. Perhaps you would help me. I am a little tired, after all."

I gave her my arm. Her hand rested on it without a tremor. In one sense, she was unhurt. It was those two who had to be protected, their disgrace shielded from my eyes. I believe that her first reaction was one of a chivalrous regret, as though she had pried inadvertently into a passion that was no concern of hers. Only after the first few steps she began to realise—to feel the full weight and significance of the blow. Even then it was only her body that failed a little.

As we reached the end of the colonnade he met us. He had been running. I had heard his step on the stone stairway and their stealthy haste had made my hold on Lisbeth's arm tighten. But she seemed blindly unaware of him. Even when he stood in front of her she only turned aside a little like a sleepwalker. He put his hand out and touched her and she stopped. From that moment onwards her docility was absolute, and must have tortured. It was as though her mind had withdrawn itself. He could do what he chose.

He looked from one to the other of us. It was almost dark where we stood and yet he had a quality of life fanned to its full force, that seemed to emanate a light about him. And he knew instantly. He knew that I had become hostile and strong. The cool, fierce keenness of his expression changed to a sardonic humour as though he found himself caught in a trap that was at once tragic and horribly funny.

"Marreno's moved sooner than I expected," he said briefly. "In a few minutes this place will be surrounded. I have been warned."

His eyes rested on Lisbeth's face. They must have been difficult to resist in their imperiousness. But I do not think she saw him. And without a word, with a famished movement that was yet one of exquisite restraint and tenderness he drew her to him, lifting her like a child.

"Come too," he ordered; "and for God's sake quietly."

I obeyed. Whether Lisbeth had fainted or not I did not know. But I was going with her. And I could afford to marvel at his strength. Though he was neither tall nor obviously athletic, he carried her with such ease, holding her against his breast, and even then, with death or worse hot at our heels, I knew that he was fighting for her with all the passion and magnetism of which he stood possessed. I saw his lips at her ear. I heard the stream of tenderness which he poured over her. And for all its headlong sincerity, it was the tenderness of a great lover who knows his power and measures it.

So we passed like ghosts down unlit corridors and through an unguarded side-door into an empty street. He had not acted too soon. A party of armed men swung round the street corner at the double, bearing down upon the Palace. They had come out suddenly from shadow into the moonlight and did not see us as we stepped back into the protection of a doorway. As I looked after them I saw them break up into parties, and sentries take their stand at the very exit from which we had just escaped.

"They always suspected that I was the devil himself," John Smith murmured. "When they find I've gone they'll be sure of it. But they 'll make a bloody massacre all the same. Decies got away too, fortunately. He's gone to warn my men and bring horses. Marreno's been cleverer than I thought possible. I shall have the fight on my hands before I wanted it."

He was not afraid for the final issue—not even very

much concerned. His mind was set on some other, more dangerous conflict. And yet there were men in that crowded assembly who trusted him and had come from all the ends of the earth to follow him and whom he had left to their fate. I guessed that he had planned for this possibility. At least, he made his way from one deserted street to another with an unfaltering precision. And when at last we were driven out into a thoroughfare, he set Lisbeth on her feet and spoke to her with a gentle authority.

"You must walk now. Lean on me. Cover your hair. There's only one woman with such hair in Quetzelango."

Even then he could pay her a gallant compliment, bending over her with that mastering adoration. And though she made no answer, she responded bravely. I covered his gay uniform with my cloak and he smiled and thanked me.

"We're always doing each other good turns in spite of ourselves, Fitzroy."

So they crossed the street, crowded with the city's desultory pleasure-seekers, unaware, as yet, that their brief peace was already in atoms, arm in arm like any other pair of lovers. And I walked close in front of them, trying to shelter them. For one glance of recognition would have lost us all.

Then once free of the crowd, back in the unlit side streets, he lifted her in his arms again, mocking her a little for being so small and light. She had passed out of reach and he knew and there was no laughter in his face now. But it was implacably resolute.

We came finally to the shabby outskirts of the city. Here, I remembered, the Baron had been quartered and for a reason that was now clear to me. He, at any rate, was on the line of retreat. But the house might have been his own choice. It was like himself. In the un-

wholesome moonlight it had a look of lost magnificence and bold, shameless decay. He opened the decrepit door to us. He was flagrantly drunk and in his shirt-sleeves, but he was booted and spurred. The bedroom behind him was littered with the accoutrements of a swagger cavalryman and thick with smoke and the smell of spirits. But I will say this for him. He recognised us and was sober. He pulled us in, shutting the door and locking it. Before he had asked a single question, he had thrust himself into his tunic and was buckling on his sword-belt.

"Our friend Marreno, *hein?*"

John Smith set his burden down gently on the squalid bed. He ran his hand over her hair, smoothing its disorder as though nothing else mattered to him.

"Yes. He was nearly too smart for me. He has a thousand men inside the Palace by this time. But I was warned—as, of course, I knew I should be warned."

"What now?"

"Decies is safe. I have told him to withdraw the men out of the city to Antora. I shall rejoin him there and we can choose our moment to settle with Marreno finally. But if there are any stragglers to-night—well, they won't straggle again, poor devils."

"And your wife, General?"

"You and Fitzroy will ride with her to San Juan. You have horses. You know the road. There are native troops up there and a score or so of our own men—enough for protection if they should think of attacking you. But they won't. You should get through easily. They've hardly realised I've got away. The roads will be unguarded for another hour at least."

"What about yourself?"

"Decies will be here soon. I shall get news."

"Good." The Baron adjusted his military cap to the

correct angle. I saw him glance at himself in a cracked fragment of glass on the dirty wall. He looked a debauched ruffian, but perhaps he caught a glimpse of the slender-waisted dandy of the Dragoons he had once been. Our eyes met and he grimaced resignedly. *"Glauben Sie nur, Herr Graf—unter den Linden* I was the devil of a fellow."

"Better saddle up," John Smith ordered. "If there is anyone hanging around shoot him—or choke the life out of him. We can run no risks."

The Baron nodded and went out. John Smith turned to me. He seemed undaunted and the old ironic gaiety was in his eyes. But there was something about him which made me wince as I have always winced at the sight of pain beyond help.

"Well—at any rate I'm confoundedly glad you were there, Fitzroy. You understand and you will make her understand."

It was audacious—and well judged. He challenged me to be fair. And perhaps because, as Lisbeth said, I was a man too, I could not fail him. I could, at least, see that he was playing for terrific stakes against enemies who were not fastidious as to their weapons. Nor could he be fastidious—nor, for that matter, had he ever been. Even now I could see in him a sort of indignant and impatient bafflement at the realisation that such things could matter or count against the magnificence of his purpose.

He turned from me to Lisbeth. She had not moved but sat where he had placed her, her hands folded in her lap, her face composed into a look of remote and inaccessible thought. The features were sharpened. It was as though they had been filed down to the bone, and I think he saw clearly for the first time what I had always seen—

the lines of a strength and an implacability not less than his own. He went to her and sat beside her, gathering her hands in his, chafing them as though he found them cold.

"You saw us, didn't you? She was my spy, Lisbeth, I had to pay her in the only coin she wanted. It was for all our lives."

But she made no answer. She did not seem to hear and he let her go and stood up violently. He began to talk then as I had never heard him talk, as I should have believed impossible to his cool self-confidence, pacing backwards and forwards, raging at us both. We were damned fools, blind bigots, blasphemers. We had the minds of a London suburb, we would sell our God for a twopenny convention. Didn't we see—didn't we understand that this was the hour of destiny in the history of a whole Continent? Didn't we know that he was to turn savagery and chaos into peace and order? Didn't we know that there were men in every State of Central America awaiting his signal to throw in their forces on the side of unity? A kind of heroic eloquence poured from him. He spoke like a man inspired of great new human beginnings—of art and poetry that were to be re-born on this virgin soil, of effete nations that were to make way to this Empire of adventuring and daring men. He had a vision, a force of self-expression that even in the heat of passion he was using deliberately, and that swept me like a tidal wave from my judgment. I forgot our wretched surroundings, the apparent ludicrousness of his powers, the imminent danger in which we all stood. He was like a drawn sword, flashed before my eyes, dazzling and stupefying me.

"And now, at the turning point, you want to trip me up and hobble me. You dare to measure me by the stand-

ard of little men who live and die like flies, who have no other god but their respectability, their miserable anemic virtues. You are slaves, you and your fears and your pity and your scruples. But I am free and all free men will follow me to the end of time."

He spoke of himself as of something fundamental and eternal. And he was saved from grandiloquence by an absolute belief. Yet I knew that he had never theorised before concerning his destiny, had never stopped for a moment to justify himself. In desperate haste he was building up this splendid edifice. He offered it to her. He held the doors open. And she would not even look. She was sunk in her own vision.

"Lisbeth!"

He cried out to her. But she made only a little movement of the hands, infinitely weary.

"I am very tired. I should like to go somewhere where it is very quiet. You see, I have to think of my baby."

"Fitzroy—she's ill."

"What else do you expect?" I asked bitterly.

The Baron threw open the door. Our lives depended on his quickness. But we had forgotten.

"All ready," he said grinning. "We'll show them a clean pair of heels. Decies is here."

I saw the Colonel's immaculate figure on the threshold.

"Withdrawing in good order, General. I had hard work keeping the men from falling on the Palace, then and there. But street fighting at night wouldn't suit our book. I told them we were going to play for a clean sweep."

John Smith did not answer. He was looking at me.

"Will she stand the journey?"

"God knows."

"Well, it can't be helped now. She must take her chance. Go ahead. You must carry her. Change horses."

I went out and mounted. He followed with Lisbeth in his arms. He lifted her up to me. Our eyes met and I shook my head significantly.

"It was no good."

"Well, that can't be helped either."

She lay quietly across my saddle and against my shoulder. With my one arm I knew that I could not hold her there for long, but that moment seemed to wipe out everything that I had suffered. He smiled—a little at the unreasoning and selfish happiness I could not hide—a little at my infirmity.

"I'll win yet, Fitzroy. You're not strong enough. But you'll take care of her. You'll make her understand that there's no one else in the world for me."

Decies touched him.

"They're all right. Better be going, General."

But he would not move. We rode at a sharp trot to the end of the street. I looked back and he was still standing there. The moon rising over his shoulder threw out his huge shadow across the dead white roadway. It was his only companion, sinister and ironic.

2

We rode all night. There was no question as to what Lisbeth could bear. It was what we had to do. There was no place of rest or safety for us till we reached San Juan. For an hour, I carried her. I gave myself that hour, not thinking any more, shutting off past and future. The Baron rode ahead on the winding trail and as the moon went down darkness hid us and she and I were alone together in an empty world. She may have event?"

slept. More likely an instinct of self-preservation had induced a sore of numbness. She, too, had ceased to struggle and gave herself passively to the event. One hand half clenched rested against my breast, like the hand of a tired, confiding child. Yet she was a woman and even that touch had the secret strength the mystic compassion of a woman. I was not the protector. Perhaps no man has ever really protected a woman. He plays the part as an imaginative boy will play at hero, but it is always the woman who at the end of the game, draws him, half-smiling, to her breast, shielding him from life. His need of her is her only need of him.

And yet, knowing that, it harmed away the deadly weariness of my body to think that at least she was at peace with me.

It was not her pain but mine that roused her finally. She made me let her ride alone on the spare horse and whilst I walked beside her, her hand would drop to my shoulder, pressing it gently, assuring me that everything was well with her. She hardly spoke and then it was in a low voice, almost inaudible even in that oppressive silence, and what she said made my heart stand still. For first she asked me to forgive her—she did not say for what—and after that, it seemed, she went back many years to our last picnic together under Old Stoneborough's grey walls.

"Of course, you will love Oxford. I shall miss you so, dear Euan, but I mustn't tell you, because you ought to be glad." She sighed deeply. It was as though her body spoke now, against her will, without her knowledge. "It hurts," she murmured. "It hurts."

I put my arm about her. Her pain ran all through my nerves.

I remember how hot that night was. The red peak be-

hind us sent out a feverish, burning breath. The loose stones scorched my feet. But towards morning, before the sun rose and one ash-hued veil after another was lifted from the mountains, a bitter chill, like the coming of death, descended upon us. Hope ebbed. We were at the bottom of our vitality. I saw the Baron pull up suddenly and look back at us.

"Something queer here," he said. "There should be an outpost. Wait."

He dismounted. He went to the edge of the trail and bent over something that looked like a heap of dirty discarded clothing. After a moment's hesitation he lifted it and carried it into the bushes. He came back wiping his great hands on his tunic. In the unearthly morning light he looked old and fallow.

"He's over-reached himself this time. Something has happened. Heaven knows——"

My gesture stopped him. He threw Lisbeth a glance that was startlingly compassionate, and with a shrug of his shoulders, remounted. A few yards further on we came out into the road that led from the camp to the hacienda and it was empty and silent with a silence that was not of sleep. No trotting pedlars, no soldiers on the march. Somewhere, somehow the stream of activity had been cut short. I dared not look my fear in the face, but I felt it at my heels, haunting me step by step. We reached San Juan just as the sun rose in a fierce conflagration above the rim of the Cordilleras. It was like a sudden terrible rekindling of the fire that had turned San Juan, in one night, from its princely magnificence, into a heap of black and smouldering ruins.

A strange figure came out from under the shattered archway to meet us. I remembered soldiers whom I had

seen staggering back from the first-line trenches after a forty-eight hours' bombardment. He was like that. He was grimy, tattered, disrupted-looking, with sunken bloodshot eyes in which a vision of hell still seemed to linger. He swayed as he walked. But he was game too. The irrepressible gameness of him was my one key to his identity. As to us, I don't think he knew who we were or cared. Respect for persons was probably not deeply ingrained in him at the best of times and now his familiarity was such that it must have stirred up red rage in the Baron's Prussian spirit. He almost leant against that officer's horse, giggling feebly.

"Well," he said, "you've missed a picnic and no mistake. Like old times."

Then he saw Lisbeth. His jaw dropped. Under other circumstances I could have sworn he had been drinking. He had all a drunken man's absurd gravity. "Look 'ere, you can't you know. Not a lidy. Not fit for lidies. Take 'er back, quick, Señor. It's a beastly mess—that's wot it is."

The Baron caught him by the shoulder and shook him savagely.

"What's happened? Where are the rest?"

Finney made no resistance. When the Baron had finished shaking him, he recovered his equilibrium with difficulty but without resentment.

"Well, some of us are here and some of us aren't. I don't know where they've gone. It's them damn niggers done it. Got wind from somewhere the General had been murdered. Stampeded. The whole lot. I always said you couldn't trust 'em. Hundreds. There were twenty of us. We held out here as long as we could. But they rushed us. We made a bolt for the woods.

When it seemed quieter like, I sneaked back. Felt I ought'er keep the home fires burning so to speak."

We three considered one another grimly. I had seen Lisbeth's face. She had passed beyond realisation. I fancied that the sinister and piteous ruins of his ambition appeared to her mind as a picture of her life—symbolic rather than actual. Consciousness of danger she had none. But she was the centre of the situation for all three of us. She moved even the other two profoundly. Finney was, no doubt, a sentimentalist, like most Cockneys, but the Baron too, remorseless as he was, had an expression on his face as he looked at her which redeemed it from its brutality.

She had lost her mantilla on the road and her hair had come loose and hung about her shoulders. Even when Lisbeth is an old woman, there will linger a certain untouched youthfulness about her—a kind of morning glow. And it was that and the hollowness of her cheeks and the lines about her mouth pain-drawn and indomitable, giving her a look as old as pain itself, that hurt all three of us. Her eyes were fixed in front of her as on something visible only to herself, and we thought she did not even hear.

"Well, we can't go back," the Baron muttered. "There's nowhere to go back to. Besides, the Señora isn't strong enough. We've got to make the best of things."

"Are those devils likely to show themselves again?" I asked.

Finney grimaced.

"They've looted everything they could loot. That's all I know——"

"Is there a roof left?"

"A few rooms. The fire burnt itself out."

"They'll have to do."

But Finney held his ground. He became suddenly obstinate and purposeful. The Señora must wait. It was a mess—that's what it was—a mess. Not fit for a lady. For the moment, with his queer insistence, he dominated us. I lifted Lisbeth to the ground and we made a sort of resting-place for her under the charred walls. She was unresisting and yet somewhere at the back of her mind must have been a consciousness of our anxiety and a compassionate desire to make things easier for us. She held the Baron's hand and smiled up at him with a piteous cheerfulness. He might have been an old and trusted friend. And I knew that she had distrusted and disliked him.

"You mustn't worry about me. I'm quite all right. But I would like to stay here, if we could. It's so peaceful, isn't it?"

That was beyond his comprehension. He could only growl an unintelligible reassurance at her. But his face had a queer expression of despair.

"Women," he said afterwards, "good or bad, are the devil anyway. They upset everything. There's no chance of a decent clean fight with them round. Either they or we are damned mistakes. I don't know which. Look at us. I don't mind. If those half-breed scallywags come back, I'll be glad to shoot a few of 'em before I get my congé. I'm bound to die in my boots. I don't ask anything better. But with her there—what the hell are we to do?"

"One of us has got to find John Smith," I said.

He assented.

"If he's wiped out Marreno—if not——"

He left it at that. We went through the archway into the patio. A wave of brutal, stupid destruction had broken over its beauty, stripped the orange trees to gaunt

skeletons, flung down the fountains, beaten the flowers into the earth. The golden god had gone from his place. He lay face downwards amidst the fragments of his pedestal. The wreckers had been too mad, too terrified, perhaps, to carry him with them.

Finney beckoned me.

"They caught three of us," he whispered. "Beasts, that's wot they are. That's wot I didn't want 'er to see."

It had been Lisbeth's room, I think. At least, it was a woman's room and its shattered sullied delicacy filled me with a rage beyond all reason. It was as though I actually saw the dirty, animal hands at their work—as though they were mauling her own self, despoiling her, breaking into her intimate life. But all that was imaginary. It was not that that mattered. At sight of these three mutilated ghastly figures, huddled under the high barred window, as though caught in one last desperate effort at escape, I heard the Baron break into a torrent of black oaths.

Finney spoke with the dispassionateness of an old campaigner to whom horror had become a part of life. Indignation was natural, of course, but quite useless.

"It wasn't only them native soldiers. The miners were the first. Wot happened to old Jakes I don't knows. In shreds, as likely as not. He wasn't soft handed himself and they'd be glad to pay off old scores. They came up in the dark. You couldn't see 'em—you could just feel em'—swarming. Not 'umans—nor animals either—sort of 'alf and 'alf creatures that made you sick. Well, we barricaded ourselves in 'ere, but there wasn't much we could do in the dark like that. You see, they didn't care about guns—not about nothing except killing. Suppose they thought it was about their turn to hand out some of the rough stuff, as you might say." He passed the

back of his hand over his mouth as though trying to wipe away a bitter taste. "Them three were rather pals of mine. I 'opes they died quick."

He was scarcely resentful. They were beasts, but he had a dim sense of justice that blunted anger. And the dead were dead anyway.

"Got to think of the Señora," he said.

I sent him back to keep guard over her and the Baron and I worked in silent feverish haste. The three poor bodies we laid among the ruins of John Smith's chapel at the feet of the despoiled and faceless Madonna. Then we set to, and cleaned the room up, hiding the traces of disaster as best we could. We found fresh linen somewhere and it was a queer, half-laughable, half-moving sight to see the hulking, blue-jowled blackguard toiling, with a kind of military precision, to make her bed for her. He even discovered her personal things in a shattered drawer and laid them out, fingering a lace cap with an expression of extreme mockery.

"Lady's maid!" he said. "Na, no man can tell what he may come to!"

But I knew that he was secretly proud of himself.

When our best was done I brought her in, leaning on my arm. I tried to talk easily and lightly.

"You must be awfully tired, Lisbeth. Well, you're safe home now. You can rest as long as you like."

She looked round her. How much she saw I don't know. The ruin was obvious enough. But I think that pain and weariness and the premonition of a greater agony to come absorbed her so that only a few things were clear.

"You won't go far, will you? I think I could sleep if only I knew you were quite near, Euan."

I kissed her hand.

"I shall be outside, waiting. You've only got to call."

Her eyes rested on me with a sad intentness.

"Yes. You've always been there waiting, haven't you?"

I did not—could not have answered. I closed the door and took up my post like a sentinel. If I had known that afternoon, outside Old Stoneborough, that one day I should keep guard over her in dead earnest, I should have been proud and comforted. But now I was older. I could only think of her danger and my helplessness.

3

Lisbeth slept. She lay outstretched in a frightening inertness. Or my love may have made a coward of me. I crept up to her and listened to her breathing. She seemed to feel my nearness and to take comfort, for she turned over then, with a deep sigh, lying more naturally, like a tired child.

The afternoon sun blazed down on the ruined garden. It covered the wrecked loveliness with a profound and drowsy peace so that the disaster might have been an ancient half-forgotten story. We three sat in the shadow of Lisbeth's silence and took counsel. We were as divided from one another by temperament and upbringing as we well could be, but I doubt if three men have ever been better comrades. Some influence transcended our differences. Our loneliness and helplessness seemed an outward manifestation of a profounder isolation which drove us to seek refuge with one another. And we could hardly have sat in the midst of such a scene without realising, each of us in his own way, the futility of most of the desires which had haunted us. We were dead tired too. Even the Baron's rough vitality had flagged,

leaving him high and dry on the shores of a bitter disillusionment.

"Yes, I'll find John Smith," he said. "I've got to. And probably I'll ruin him and myself and a few hundred others who haf put their shirts on his coming through. He'll drop everything. When he hears of this he'll leave Marreno to do his worst. There's a curse on him. Things have been shaky for months past. He's slipped out of one mistake after another by a huge effort at the last moment. But you can't go on for ever like that. And he's been gambling—and fate has got her claws out for a big man who gambles with her. This for instance"—he waved his arm—"you couldn't say exactly that this was his fault. He couldn't haf known. But a year ago it wouldn't haf happened. Makes me think he's up against something we don't know about."

Still, he would go to Antora. He knew the trail, and with luck might get through. If so we could expect relief within twenty-four hours. Meantime, Finney and I could only hope for the best. Finney had a rifle and no ammunition and I had my revolver. If the mutineers chose to return, the struggle could be only a very brief one. Our only chance lay in the very completeness of the havoc they had wrought. There was nothing for them to return to. Earlier in the day Finney had made a cautious descent to the river and had found the San Juan mine a smouldering ruin. Jakes' body lay where death had overtaken him. Finney passed over the details with a shrug.

"Seems to me grinding the faces of your bloomin' fellow creatures don't pay," he reflected. "You get it in the neck in the end."

With the sudden coming of night the Baron led out his horse. He was not a romantic or a pathetic figure.

And yet there was a certain pathos in his farewell of us. A crass materialist brought face to face with the more subtle, more vital issues of the spirit is like a lost child. He did not know what was the matter with him. He felt only that the solid foundations on which he built his conduct were giving way. And he expressed that feeling in his own terms.

"A woman against an empire!" he said. "Na—it's happened before. And it always ends the same way."

He rode off, slouching heavily in his saddle. I think he would have been genuinely glad if a native machette had caught him between the shoulders.

He dropped into the night and I went back to my post. As to Finney, he prowled the place like a somnambulist, too worn down with weariness to know what danger he was listening for.

The moon had not yet risen, but a hot and brilliant starlight filled the patio with a pale brightness and shadows that took on grotesque and threatening shapes. I know I did not sleep, and yet sometimes I seemed to lose hold in my surroundings. For long minutes together the outlines of past and present became merged in one another. I was back in Old Stoneborough. These were the familiar ruins that had become unfamiliar and horrible as though an evil and alien spirit had entered into them. I saw John Smith come out of the darkness. The unearthly light flickered on the borrowed helmet and the steel breast-plate.

"They fit me perfectly," he said, smiling.

I could hear his voice, clear and very young still.

Gradually, these pictures faded. My mind died. I was nothing but an instinct of protection. There was not a sound, not the flutter of bird or the rustle of some reptile that had already found a hiding-place among the

tumbled walls, that did not reach me with its full significance. I was on guard with every nerve, every physical faculty—to what end I no longer thought.

I had killed men. The bitter and even just necessity of it had not saved me from the results. Better men than I had gone with me to the War and come back unscathed, even if their bodies were shattered. For their generation was not mine. But I had come back crippled in mind and soul. And not till I had atoned in part for that offence against myself had I become whole again.

And now at a given signal from Finney I should kill Lisbeth. I should save my last shot for her. That was the immemorial duty of men. The ferocious wrong of it helped to stupefy me. It made everything unreal. Either I was a madman or this was a mad world. There were things too hideous to be true—like those medieval instruments of torture. One looked at them, thinking: "No human being could have borne suffering like that," and turned away from them.

Then, in a moment, the whole of me awoke. I don't believe that it was any sound that brought me to that sudden and absolute awareness. No sound, at least, could have told me what I seemed to know instantly. Before a thought had formed itself, I was on my feet—had thrown open her door.

There was enough light for me to see her. Her back was to the white wall opposite me, as though she had taken her last stand there against a pursuing implacable enemy. Her lips that even when she smiled retained their closed sweetness were parted now. Her face was that of another woman who had sprung out of herself at the call of an agony beyond belief—distraught, possessed by an appalling knowledge. Her youth—her beauty had

foundered. And yet there was a kind of terrible glory about her. As she saw me she took a step forward—then crumpled up as though an invisible blow had struck her to the heart.

I ran to her—lifted her. Her limp body was drenched with an icy sweat. I half-dragged, half-carried her to her bed. I doubt if she realised who I was. She could not have cared. Alternately she clung to me and thrust me off with frantic hands. The pain tore her asunder, disrupted her whole being so that for the moment she was a tortured thing that passed out of knowledge of itself. She cried out at last, so piteously, so terribly that it brought Finney aghast and shaken to the open door. I turned fiercely on him.

"She's ill. Keep away from here."

"Not—not—" He gasped stupidly at me.

"Yes. Get out. Don't come near us—not unless you have to."

He was gone like a shadow.

I knelt down beside her. I helped her as best I could. As the pain relaxed its grip, standing back from her like a wild beast, itself exhausted, waiting to spring again, I slipped my arm under her head and for a little while she lay quite still, half-conscious, against my shoulder. It gave me time—a moment's space in which to face myself and her. In which to prepare to meet her when she should turn to me at last in full realisation of what lay before us both.

She drew away from me. Our faces were on a level. We looked close into each other's lightless eyes. She said in a low voice:

"Is it that—Euan?"

"Yes."

"Send someone."

"There's no one—only me."

She tried to push me away from her.

"Leave me alone—oh, please, please leave me alone——"

I shook my head and she began to cry with weakness and horror at the thing which had happened to us. And for a while I could not try to comfort her. There was panic in my heart too—the fear that takes a man before what he knows to be the supreme and testing crisis of his life. In one sense this was the end towards which I had been living. If I failed now, I failed utterly and finally. If I could not lift her with me out of this shameful shame to some high clear perception of our common dignity, if I could not find the releasing word to set us free to face this destiny of ours with untroubled eyes, then the absolute chastity of my whole life went for nothing. Then I was any man and she was any woman, caught in a trap of circumstances intolerable to them both.

The dark was kind to me. It hid me from her. I was just a shadow, talking to her, the very heart of Euan Fitzroy talking to the very heart of Lisbeth Gay. We had never talked like that before or been so close to one another. I found myself with my face pressed gently against hers. We might have been two children again.

I told her of the time when she had been so ill—how I had stood, night after night, looking up at that sad light in her window, and how, on the worst night of all, I had put my face down on her gate and cried my heart out. Then how a kind of rage had seized me and how I had sworn to become a doctor, because if there was pain like that in the world I had to be there to help.

Then I told her about the afternoon when she had slept and I sat beside her, guarding her from the dragons that wouldn't come.

"They've come now, Lisbeth."

And she lay very still, listening, judging me.

All at once it came—my releasing word—quite simply and naturally as perhaps all inspiration comes. I kissed her cheek. I said: "I love you."

I could have added: "not as a man loves the woman he desires, not as he might love his sister, but as one human being may love another at the hour of death, with passion and with understanding, with high admiration and the tenderest pity." But all that was said. It had come straight from my heart. I had lived it. She turned to me again and the tears were dry. She knew that our time was short to reach that absolute peace with one another which we must have—that in a few minutes the wave would break over her. Her voice was just a breath.

"I'm—glad it's you."

And then in her selflessness, on the edge of an abyss which she was to sound to its uttermost depths, she took my face between her slender woman's hands, soothing and comforting me.

She and I lived through that night alone. There was no one else but us two in the regions where we travelled. Where she went I followed—through red agony into brief stretches of grey oblivion. It seemed to me that she and I were locked together. I knew that with each awful onslaught I felt my own body being dismembered, the cold sweat run down my cheeks. With her piteous cry, "the pain, Euan, the pain," I answered: "I know," between set teeth. And yet my brain remained clear and quiet. What I could do was well done.

Sometimes she went down utterly—was drowned in it—so that her very soul seemed to be extinguished. But

more and more, towards the end, she rallied. She was like a gallant soldier, overwhelmed by the first rush, who gathers strength and courage with every moment's respite—and at the last it was a splendid thing to see the immortal spirit in her shake off its enemy and shine out with a clear steadfastness.

With the first light of morning the end came and John Smith's son was born into my hands and died.

I thought she was dying too. I was herself, and life was ebbing out of me. And one thing, at least, was clear, making death inevitable. She and I could never go back into the world we had both left. We had reached our destination. The road thither, the other travellers we had passed and spoken with, were already lost in mist, like a fading dream.

I knelt beside her again. There was nothing more that I could do. The light was brightening with every minute and we saw each other clearly. That didn't matter now. Since the hearts of Euan Fitzroy and Lisbeth had found one another, their bodies were only visible and outward signs of their love and faith. Her face was very small and the colour of death. Her red-gold hair, caught in the gathering sunshine, became an aureole. Her eyes, broken with weariness, were blue and clear as an Italian sky.

"I am dying. It doesn't matter now, my darling——"

We kissed one another. She put her weak arms about me and drew me against her breast as though I had been the child she had never seen. So we remained. We were both sinking into darkness. She drew me with her and I went gladly. The ordinary instinctive clinging to life was over. My weary body relaxed its hold. Only the obstinate will to follow her—to bear her company to the end of time—remained. Nothing else lived in me. In

the depths where she and I went together there was no sound but the slow, faltering beat of her heart—my own heart—slower and slower.

4

Gradually, I was being drawn back. A hand had thrust down into the dark and taken hold of me and lifted me towards the surface. I fought against it, but I might as well have fought the daybreak. And I was conscious of some subtle change outside myself. Somewhere a tide had turned.

A voice called me. Finney's voice. Danger then. So much my instinct remembered. It sufficed to jerk me back to life with every faculty strung up to a sudden supernormal keenness. By this time it was full daylight and but for that voice, urgent but subdued, very quiet. I freed myself from the arms that no longer held me and stood up, stiff and broken like an old man. She was asleep, but whether that sleep was a tranquil passing from one state to another I did not know. I went out into the sunlit patio where Finney waited for me. He had kept away from her door as from a place of pity and terror, and now his open stare of compassion made me put my hand to my eyes, hiding them from him. His own were sunken and bloodshot and I had a moment's involuntary wonder at our marvellousness. It was for this unprofitable suffering the little Cockney had left peace and security.

He asked first in a whisper, "Is she better, Capting?" and as I shook my head he drooped wearily. "Wouldn't 'ave called you, Sir, but there's two of our chaps outside —come up from the City—and"—he paused, grimacing —"a lady."

Well, I knew. There was the implacable inevitability of a Greek drama about it all. We had lost control of our fate—if we had ever held it—and were being driven helplessly towards its fixed culmination. I followed Finney outside where two of John Smith's Legionaries awaited me on horseback. The woman kept aloof, but I saw her first. I knew that my first impulse was to hide her—get her away from the terrific background which made her seem at once horrible and pitiable. Evidently, she, too, had been caught unawares and fled anyhow. She wore a tawdry bright-coloured dress—torn at the hem—with a soiled and flimsy wrap flung over her big shoulders. Fatigue had scored heavy lines about her mouth. There were unwholesome pouches under her eyes and the flesh under the reckless chin had sagged. The paint was streaked with dust and sweat and a blazing sunlight derided the shallow brightness of her disordered hair. She looked like a terrible clown. She knew and hated us all for it so that she could have killed us.

The two men saluted me, cheerful but embarrassed.

"We're get-aways. We were having a little celebration party with this lady when the row started and we managed to fade out quietly. We thought we'd find everything nice and homey up here, but it seems you've had troubles of your own."

"There's not much left to us," I said.

"Well, I guess we'll be glad of what there is. We've had the hell of a time. Lucky we were well stoked up when we started, for we haven't smelt food for forty-eight hours. We had to lie low all yesterday. Some of your devils passed almost over us. Seeing where they were coming from, I nearly gave 'em a hail. But I had a hunch. I'm an American and I've seen niggers with the

lid off. I know the look—" Then he introduced Paula to me, rather shamefacedly. "Mademoiselle Lavasser—a good sport. Said she had friends up here."

"Sir Euan is one of them," she said staring at me with hard eyes.

I helped her from her saddle and she gave my hand an ironic pressure. "I know how glad you are. I do haf a way of turning up, don't I? Don't tell me the lady of the house is out. I want to meet her. I haf come all this way—I haf heard so much of her. As an old friend of the General's, it's about time, *nicht wahr?*"

She was being ugly and she took a savage wicked pleasure in her ugliness.

"Do you want to see her now?" I asked.

"Well, why not? Better get it over. It's a bit early for a call, but then such queer things happen in this country, don't they? I will make my excuses——"

I saw the two men look at each other, puzzled and uncomfortable. But I left them to Finney without explanation and went with her under the archway into the patio. She continued to chatter insolently.

"Nice boys. Real gentlemen. We were playing poker—and they played r-rottenly. I'd haf had three months' pay out of them if the shooting hadn't started. I made 'em bring me along. They didn't want to—thought my sort kind of international property—but when I threatened to scream the place down, they saw it was safer to take the women and children along too, so to speak. Real chivalry. Rough diamonds—hearts of gold and all that——"

She laughed. But I think even then the tragic atmosphere of the place daunted her. Her eyes looked out at me from their corners with an uneasy questioning.

"Surprised to see me, *hein?*"

"No."

"You're taking it damn quietly."

"There's nothing else to be done now. It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it? Well, I shouldn't be so sure."

I stood aside to let her pass in front of me into Lisbeth's room. I wasn't playing for any stakes this time. Lisbeth was out of reach. I myself had passed beyond despair or hope. It gave me a queer sensation of power.

"This is Lisbeth Gay, Paula."

I heard a smothered sound beside me. I think she swore to herself. She must have felt tricked already—as though I had cheated her by a sort of malicious cunning. But I didn't care.

For Lisbeth lay outstretched in what seemed a dreamless sleep. Very white she looked, with a lofty composure of brow and mouth which I had seen too often. Her hands on the coverlet were like waxen flowers. Very young—like a little girl—and very old. As she had said, "I have seen all-round life, Euan," and now it was true.

A hard hand gripped my arm.

"Look here—what is it—what's the game—is she asleep?"

"She is dying."

"But—*du liebe Himmel*—of what, man?"

"Her baby was born this morning. Prematurely."

"And—and *you?* What are *you* doing here?"

"There was no one else," I said after a moment in a voice that sounded to me quite mad in its detached calm. "The baby is dead too. I've put it in the Chapel with the rest. There are quite a number of dead people in this place——"

She had taken a step forward. Now she turned and looked back at me. What she saw I don't know.

"You poor devil!" she said.

I let her go right up to the bedside. And then I followed and we stood together looking down on to that quiet face. Paula made a movement as though she would have touched Lisbeth, as a child instinctively holds out its hand to touch something beautiful. Then her hand dropped. She spoke in a whisper.

"Of course, I remember what you said to me. It made me think for a moment that you were the last man in this earth—But she must haf been glad. My mind's a muck-heap. I can't think decently about anything. But I can see straight. You're all right. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter."

"She isn't dead, is she?"

"No."

I happened to turn to her. There was a queer unexpected look on that debauched face—something vigorous and eager and almost exultant. She shook me by the arm.

"Well then—you poor fool of a fellow—she doesn't need to die—not while I'm round."

That was Paula. I had appealed to her in vain, and Lisbeth, whom she must have hated, had said nothing, and in a moment all her chivalry was up in arms. The poor damaged instrument could still give out its music.

It seemed that in some interval between one war—intrigue and another she had tried nursing. The experiment could not have lasted long for in an ordinary way she must have been a disaster to any sickroom, haphazard, disorderly, and undisciplined. But this wasn't an ordinary case. We had no resources—scarcely enough food. We had only one asset—a determination that would not think of defeat as possible. Paula was like some central,

inexhaustible furnace. She fought for Lisbeth with her teeth set. She willed Lisbeth to live with every atom of her own vitality. I don't know why. Even now it remains one of those mysteries of the human heart which if we could solve might bring us within sight of peace. She flung into the fight everything that she had—her violence, her courage, her ruthlessness, her generosity. The very qualities which had meant her own ruin were now her weapons. I believe she physically and literally swept Lisbeth back from the brink of death. The struggle lasted for two awful days, in which no word came to us from the outside. We seemed to be isolated in a silent world of which Lisbeth was the beginning and the end. In my light-headedness it sometimes seemed as though, if she should die, we would all vanish, even to San Juan itself, like a mist of fancies. So much had we become a part of her.

Finney and the two Legionaries did what they could. They threw up vigorous defences against a possible return of the enemy. They sweated at their task with a passion of haste as though it were death itself they were trying to keep from our gates.

As for the two women, they took each other for granted. Lisbeth never asked concerning Paula, and even if she had known the worst I doubt if it would have mattered. For there is a secret understanding between women which can bridge every gulf—of nationality, of class, of sin itself. I believe, too, that Paula loved Lisbeth with the last pure feeling that was in her. But though she could make a fine gesture, she had become incapable of any sustained effort. She knew it. The night that Lisbeth passed definitely out of danger she turned away from me with a sort of laugh, derisive and bitter.

"Well, now I can rest up and be myself again."

She produced a pack of cards from somewhere and a flask of wine and before the night was out she had fleeced the two Legionaries of their last pesos. It came near an ugly scene.

She had saved Lisbeth. She could not save herself.

Lisbeth and I were alone. I sat beside her and watched over her as she slept. As night crept in from the patio and covered us she seemed to float up from the dark dreamlessness where she rested and I heard her voice, like a little ghost of sound.

We talked together—very quietly, as though we were afraid of waking ourselves to the world about us. It was easy to talk now. We could go back over our lives and take up our memories one by one, and look at them together as at jewels that had been locked away from us for a long time. She told me how, that day when she had seen me on the quayside, her heart had nearly broken. For she knew she loved me. It was like cutting herself off for ever from what was real to follow a magnificent fantasy—a distant, enchanting music.

"But I loved him too. I do still, Euan. Differently. It's all mixed up with pity—as though he were a lost child—terribly strong and alone. There's something in him that made me follow him—it makes everyone. I think he's like danger which people have to seek even though they know it may kill them in the end. He's simple and we're so complicated. He's like Old Stoneborough—large and free—not caring about the things that worry us—wanting tremendous things and unafraid. But we *are* complicated. We *do* worry. We can't escape. And when I begin to see what it all meant—the cruelties, the mean, treacherous, beastly things—" she turned her head pressing her hot cheek to my hand "—that's why I couldn't bear your coming—because I

knew you would see them too and make me hate them more."

"Sometimes I thought you hated me, Lisbeth."

"I did, sometimes. I'd been unfaithful; I'd made you unhappy. I knew that we belonged to one another and that it was all my fault. And so I had to hate you."

"Poor sweetheart—poor both of us."

"But when I thought I was dying, I felt I had the right to be truthful to us both. You had the right to know. All these days—you've been wonderful as a woman to me. I felt I could trust you as I could trust God."

"I love you," I answered.

"People say that all over the world," she murmured. "Everyone—little people and big people—the selfish and the unselfish—good and bad. The same words always. But they don't mean the same thing. Perhaps only a very few of us can love at all."

"He does, Lisbeth."

I had to say that. It was too big a truth for either of us to ignore. I heard her sigh.

"I know. And I'm not dying any more. I've got to live. Perhaps it will be different when I'm strong again. I don't know how to live now. I've lost my baby. I could have lived for him. He would have needed me. But sometimes I think I killed him. I didn't want him to come—I was afraid—just one more human being to hurt and be hurt. Perhaps he knew."

"My sweetheart, these are just sick fancies."

"Are they? The world's too difficult. We want things—but now they only break our hearts."

"What things, Lisbeth?"

She murmured to herself.

"Adventure—danger—power—trampling over one another—but now we see their faces—our faces."

"I know, Lisbeth. We've got to worry through."

But her mind was wandering a little. She said very simply:

"I can't live without you any more."

"You're not going to. You're coming with me—home."

Her hand tightened on mine—her slender, compassionate hand with its unexpected strength.

"I'm his wife. He's been faithful. He wouldn't understand. He's never changed. It's I who have changed. I chose to go with him—his way of life. Now I've got to go all the way." I felt her whole body stiffen in the convulsive effort not to break down. And one cry was wrung from her.

"Oh, Euan, what shall we do? It's all our lives—such a little time—such a long, long time."

I gathered her against my breast.

"Believe that it will be all right. Have faith in me."

She was too weak to struggle against my strength—my ardent certainty. She was like a sick child, trusting blindly, because there is no other escape from despair. And presently she slept again, worn out, her hand in mine.

I might have told her. I might have said, "You are free by his own act." I could not do it. It was not even my promise that held me silent now. But I had a vision of him. I remembered how that night by the Weir River he had shown me a fine chivalrous pity. He had lost her. But the last blow should not come from me. In my own exalted happiness I believed that I could wait.

VI

1

HE came at daybreak.

It was Paula who warned me. She roused me with a touch on the arm, motioning me to silence so that I should not wake Lisbeth and I followed her out into the cold twilight. I think she must have watched all night for him. Her eyes were heavy with sleeplessness. A dirty soldier's coat hung over her shoulders. She looked raffish, dishevelled, utterly gone-to-seed. And yet that incorrigible fineness lingered about her still.

"He's coming now," she said.

She pointed. Out of the purple mists that filled the valley I saw a moving cloud, like a stream of smoke from a hidden fire, wind its way slowly upwards. Gradually, the dust fell back and as it mounted the last steep bend the cavalcade seemed to falter and one man rode on alone. Though he was a mere speck I knew his face was lifted to us in a passionate questioning.

"I guess I'd better clear," Paula murmured. She spoke half to herself with a burlesque of her American victim that was friendly and good-humoured. "I've no call to stay. I'll go whilst the going's good."

"There's nowhere for you to go," I said.

"You're wrong. My sort are always at home. Even the City won't be too hot for me. Finney's saddling up a horse and will put me on the way. I told him you said so——"

"It's too late."

"He won't know I'm here. I'll take my chance and slip off."

"You're a good sort, Paula. But you might as well stay now. It's all over, anyway. You'll run too great a risk."

She grinned.

"Nothing like what I'd run here. Leave it to me. I'd stay if I could set her free for you. But I couldn't. He wouldn't let her go. Better she should think the best she can of him." She gave me her hand. "It must be rather jolly to be decent," she said. "If ever you're happy, I'll believe it pays too."

She lingered a moment longer, watching that advancing figure, her face puckered with that old ironic tenderness. Then she nodded to me and slipped back into the shadow of the house.

I waited for him. The final clash must come now—before he saw Lisbeth, if he was ever to see her again. I knew that I needed all my resolution to hold my ground against him. But it was fear for the man himself that shook me as he came round the last bend of the road. He tried to urge his horse into a gallop and as the poor beast staggered under him he lashed it pitilessly. I went to meet him. He must have been half-blind, for he tried to ride past me, and as I caught his bridle, his whip went up as though to cut down some insolent stupid impediment.

"Steady, Smith, steady—it's all right."

He stared at me. The dust had painted him from head to foot a livid yellow. It made his face into a mask. His eyes were swollen and diffused with blood. He would have looked like a madman but for that steadiness of purpose that still burnt in him.

"Eisen didn't get through till last night," he said in a choked voice. "We were after Marreno. I've left Decies to make the best he can of it. What's happened here?"

"She's safe."

He reeled out of the saddle. I held him. He tried to throw me off.

"Let me go, damn you."

"Wait. Not now. Not like that. You've got to listen to me first."

"Oh, to hell with you, Fitzroy."

"You shall listen. She's been desperately ill."

"I'm going to her. What's the matter with you? What's up your sleeve? What do you mean?"

"Your son——"

That stopped him. It was as though the mask had broken into a quivering life. He said, scarcely above a breath:

"Have I a son?"

"Not now."

He glared at me. One passion after another passed like flying clouds over his convulsed face—incredulity, grief, finally a blasting understanding.

"You mean—what are you trying to tell me—my son—born here—and you! Oh, God's curse on you, Fitzroy—not you!"

"She had no one else."

His men were close upon us. Nothing could have betrayed more poignantly what he had endured that night than the unbridled fury which he flashed out at me in a single gesture. Generosity, the wide tolerance that was natural to him, went down under a passion of jealousy, crude and physical, that seemed to strip us both to an ugly nakedness. For one moment he meant to shoot me

where I stood—blot me out with the memory of all that I had been to her. Then as suddenly his hand dropped.

"I suppose you saved her life."

"We did what we could—I and another."

"Thanks. I know, of course, that no one could have done more."

That was magnificent—a gallant, sweeping salute before we engaged finally. But he must have choked his heart down to do it. He tossed his reins to an orderly who had ridden up to him and made as though to pass me. I stopped him with my hand on his arm and I felt a tremor go through his whole body.

"I meant what I said. You can't go to her now. She is asleep—barely out of danger."

"I mean to see her. God, man, I *had* Marreno—and I ran away."

"I am sorry. I've got to speak to you first."

His eyes were almost colourless as though they were burnt to white heat. He tried to stare me down, beat down my defences and whatever lay behind them of authority. But his manner was controlled—ironical and even suave.

"I suppose doctors have a right to talk like that. Well, what is it? What have you to say?"

"I can't say it here!"

"Are there any four walls left standing?"

I nodded and we went together through the patio. There he could see the full extent of the ruin that had been wrought, but though he stood still for a moment, looking about him, he gave no sign. To do him justice, all this was trivial. He could build again—more magnificently still. At the gashed entrance to the Chapel he stopped to cross himself.

"The men who did this were recruited from neighbor-

ing pueblos," he said softly. "By to-night there will not be a roof left—or a living thing."

I could have sworn that he was speaking to the faceless Madonna, promising her atonement.

I saw him look across the patio at the closed door of Lisbeth's room. For a moment I doubted my power to hold him, but there was a hush about the place that subdued his hunger to a moving wistfulness. He turned to me. The tone of his voice changed. It was friendly—almost appealing.

"Sure she's out of danger, Fitzroy?"

"I think so. She's very weak still. If there are no complications."

"Oh, there won't be now. She shall have everything. I shall send to Chivaga at once."

I thought of the half-dead men and horses he had brought with him and wondered. He said in a low voice:

"Couldn't you have saved the boy, Fitzroy?"

"No—not as things were. I had no chance."

"Did he live at all?"

"A minute."

He sighed, muttering to himself:

"Without baptism. There is a priest among us. Well——"

We came to the room where he had lodged me first. Here the havoc was pathetic and horrible. It gave one the same sensation as contact with a vicious insanity. The posts of the beautiful Spanish bed were hacked to pieces, the rare vases had been flung down from their niches, the hangings torn to shreds, or stained with an indescribable filth. The wretched goaded slaves who had fled through here, centuries of hatred flaring up in this one moment of hideous liberty, had had an instinct for

revenge. They had added insult to ruin. The ignominy they had endured they flung back now on the loveliness they had agonised to create. They seemed to me—vague, faceless beings though they were—pitiable.

But I saw John Smith wince for the first time. There must have been things here that he had loved. He sat down on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped between his knees, his head bent, as though he did not trust himself. I closed the door and turned to him to speak. But something in his attitude checked me. I had loved him, and even now——

It was he who broke the silence.

"I brought half my best men. Decies understood. But the others—Marreno had rallied. If they hold their own till I get back, it's the best I can hope for. I've got to get back. When can we move her, Fitzroy?"

I struck then, straight and hard.

"When she is strong enough and there is a boat sailing I shall take her down to San Roberto. She is going home with me."

He lifted his head.

"Home—with you?"

"To England—as my wife."

I thought he was going to laugh. Laughter twitched at the muscles of his face, leaving a kind of grimace.

"I think you are more ill than she is."

"Don't let's waste time," I said urgently. "You know I neither lie nor talk at random. You know that I have always loved Lisbeth. When I came out here I would have asked her to be my wife. I did not do so. I knew it was useless. It is not useless now."

He stood up. He came very deliberately towards me. He was slighter than I am, scarcely taller, travel-worn, unheroic-looking enough in his crumpled dirty uniform,

near to physical collapse. Yet he bore down upon me like an overwhelming, tragic force.

"Why not?"

"You know."

"If there is any sense in what you're saying—I do know. You have made good use of your time and that damned Spaniard."

"It is not true."

"You worked upon Lisbeth and her superstitions. She was ill and in your hands. You broke your promise to me. You said, 'This man's a scoundrel. I'll make an honest woman of you.' "

"I have not told her."

"I don't believe you any more. There is no other reason possible."

"She loves me. That is the reason."

He did laugh now. It would have been intolerable had I not seen his hands and the look of his eyes.

"You're mad with your own desire. You couldn't keep her—you couldn't take her from me."

"I haven't tried to. It's you who have lost her."

"I who have given her everything."

"Yes—loot—robbers' loot. But neither peace of mind nor body."

"That's what you've taught her. I knew. I was up against you from the beginning."

"You want to think so. But it's not me you've fought—it's Lisbeth herself. You thought you could remake her in your own image But you couldn't. She's stronger than you—than either of us. You stand for things that are abominable to her. There is no compromise possible between you."

"She shall tell me that herself, Fitzroy."

I flung him back.

"Do you want to kill her?"

"I'd rather see her dead."

"Don't bluster. You're not that sort. You love her in your own way."

"My way—my way—you pettifogging fool."

He threw up his head with a contempt that was his panic. I saw him afraid now. He had his back to the wall and he was deadly. The cool ascendancy of his temper was broken. He would fight anyhow—with any weapons. And the pity of that disruption of himself moved me to an appeal, urgent with all my old unreasonable love for him.

"My way—or your way—it doesn't matter. It's the best of both of us. We've known and understood. That's been a bond between us. We've been just to one another. We can't peter out into ugliness now."

He grew suddenly very quiet. He spoke with dignity and gentleness.

"No. You're noble, Fitzroy. I accused you stupidly. I know you better. You love her—and you helped her to bear my son. I wanted to kill you for that. If you had been something less, I shouldn't have cared. But you must have touched her heart."

I felt a thickness come into my throat. I said—not daring to look at him:

"She and I have always loved one another. To you it must have seemed a tepid, humdrum affair—just as I must seem small and colourless. There were no bands and banners about it. But it was very real—deep-seated. You know my side of it. You were just and generous enough to recognise all that it meant to me. But her side you couldn't see. You swept her off her feet. She was a romantic girl, brought up by a man whose mind belonged to the Middle Ages. She didn't

know herself or what your way of living meant to her. She knew before I came. That I came—that wasn't my fault. It was yours. Then she knew something else that I had always known—that she and I belonged to one another."

He shook his head.

"No. You're wrong there. For I am bound up with her That sort of thing can't be all on one side. Other women—I've left them when the time came. It hasn't mattered. But her—Why, Fitzroy, I had Marreno in my hand—I had only to close my fingers—and I ran away. There are men who would have died for me who will never forgive me. Oh, I shall win yet. But I didn't care—even if it had been the end of everything I shouldn't have cared."

He was staring in front of him as at something baffling and incredible. All the rest had been the outburst of a proud temper, driven by fear to arrogance and violence, but this came from the heart—a cry of protest and appeal against some inexorable force he could not grapple with. "I cannot live without her," he said.

I believed him—not that he was weak or cowardly, but that he knew some vital spring in him would break. There was more than love in the struggle. He was fighting for the survival of something fundamental and essential in himself. And I could say nothing, save what was blatantly obvious.

"It's her life we have to think of."

"You're not lying. And yet I don't believe you. She left you to come with me. She is not light-minded or shallow-hearted."

"If she had been either, she would have been satisfied with what you gave her. Your ambition—and all that it involved—killed her faith in you. It drove you to do

things she couldn't forgive—even to being unfaithful to her. God knows where it will drive you in the end."

He said very quietly:

"You know that I was not unfaithful."

"I know," I admitted. "And at heart she knows too."

"I had to play every card I had."

"You cheated to win," I answered. "That was what mattered."

To my surprise he showed no resentment. Perhaps he did not hear. I doubt if he would have understood. He had begun to move restlessly about the room, picking up broken fragments of his treasures and looking at them with a blind intentness. But for the moment I could not think of him. I was listening. Footsteps sounded on the stone flags outside. They came on steadily, loud and dominant. They held me—as the advance of an overwhelming cataclysm can hold the mind and body in a sort of stupor of attention.

John Smith had stopped too.

"Fitzroy, have you asked her to go with you?"

"I told her that I would take her away."

"Did she consent?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"She was thinking of her duty to you. She believes herself your wife."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

I hesitated.

"There was our promise to one another. I had to warn you."

I saw a flood of colour rush up into his ashen face.

"Yes—she keeps her word too. And she is my wife."

"You can't cheat us with that lie any more, John Smith—none of us—least of all your Church."

Then he had one of those flamboyant gestures of the spirit, that were fine in their sincerity.

"I have not cheated God or myself," he said.

The footsteps had stopped. There was a perceptible pause in which involuntarily we turned towards the door. Against the sunlight the Baron's gorilla figure was blocked out in an ominous shadow. He saluted—entered. With him there came a new element of passion into our midst. Fatigue—and he had been three nights and days on the road, for the most part without food and in peril of his life—made him look inhuman. His calm was ugly. He smiled. I caught the white glitter of his teeth through the growth of dirty beard and they were the fangs of an animal. And when he spoke his voice had a purring savagery, a kind of thick lust close to its satisfaction, that sickened and fascinated me.

"I regret to disturb you, General. The woman of whom I warned you is caught. I arrested her five minutes ago."

John Smith remained motionless. His face was turned away from me, but I knew that he was aware of me with every nerve in his body.

"Where?"

"Slinking out of this place. She had one of our men with her—that weak-kneed Englishman, Finney. She'd got at him like she got at the rest of us—devil take her—I would haf shot them both out of hand."

"What was she doing here?"

"Spying. That's her job. Making for Marreno's headquarters with the news. I tell you I saw her with one of Marreno's officers."

"That wasn't her job here."

John Smith swung round on me. His expression

pleaded with me: "Not before this fellow." He said levelly:

"The Baron knew this woman in the old days."

"Yes—by Gott, I knew her. Ah, you may well stare, *Herr Graf*. I don't look the man to be twisted round a woman's finger. But for that woman's sake I spent three years *Festungstrafe* and a battalion of good Germans rot in French soil. I was on the Staff—she got me drunk—she picked my brains—sold her own people to a filthy English spy. Na, but you don't fool Kurt von Eisen with impunity. I've waited—I've waited—I said to myself, 'One of these days you and I will meet again, my fine lady, and then'."

His rage, passing all bounds, stifled him. I saw the blood thicken his great neck and the hairy animal hands tightened convulsively as on the life of an invisible opponent. He began to tremble and the sight of that ungainly body shaken by hatred made me sick with fear for Paula. And now I could keep silence no longer.

"What she did in the War, you know best, General. She wasn't spying here. She came to find your wife. She found her dying. She nursed her as though she had been her sister. She did finely."

He met my eyes firmly. But the irony of it all must have twisted his heart—poured gall into his blood. If ever Paula sought revenge she had it now.

"I shall not forget."

"There is another thing to be remembered."

"I ask you to wait."

I had faith enough in him to yield. I believed that the German's presence gagged us both. To have dragged out the story beneath his debauched and ugly stare was intolerable.

"What have you done with her?"

"I sent them both down to the camp—what's left of it."

"When you found her—did she say anything?"

"No." The German's bloodshot eyes widened as at something that could still astonish him. "She laughed, General."

That was like her. I could see her too—I could hear her laughter—ironical, but good-humoured.

"What do you want, Baron?"

He ran the tip of his tongue over his cracked lips.

"Orders—a wall and a firing squad."

I made a movement. His hand lifted—very slightly. It was an appeal—a reassurance.

"Do nothing till I come."

"Well, I haf waited some years, General. I can wait an hour or two."

"It is not a matter of revenge, Baron?" Then he spoke in Spanish—softly and hurriedly and I saw the Baron turn on me with a stare, amazed and quizzical as though a sudden joke had been sprung on him.

"Zur Befehl, Herr General."

He clicked his heels, bowed ceremoniously, and stepped back into the sunlight. The door closed. It shut us in an ominous dusk. I heard his great voice booming an order. It seemed to me that I had been spell-bound—and now suddenly the power that had held me broke and I was free. I turned on him. It was like a duel in which for a moment he was thrown on the defensive.

"What was it you said to him?"

"Nothing—nothing that concerns Paula."

"You are not telling the truth. What was it you said?"

"You will know presently."

"You ordered her execution."

"No."

But I saw his face—saw it too late. It was set. His

purpose, that had grown in silence and darkness, was written there in its full enormity. But overshadowing it was the realisation that the thing he did was evil—the first tragic realisation of evil as a definitive alternative which he had accepted. He looked tortured, terrible, and inflexible.

"Give me your word."

"I swear to you, Fitzroy."

"I don't believe you. I daren't."

I made for the door. I heard him call to me—a warning—an appeal—I don't know. I half expected to hear the crack of his revolver, silencing me, clearing me from his path finally. But he made no move. He stood passive, himself resigned.

The door opened before me. I had a confused vision of bright sunlight—of black shadows that threw themselves on me and became hot smothering bodies. They bore me down under their overwhelming weight. Their faces, distorted by their nearness, seemed to be all eyes and mouths, gaping and panting into mine. Their hands were at my throat. From far off John Smith's voice came to my drumming ears—subdued yet urgent.

"Go easy with him."

I wanted to shout the truth at them. But my voice failed. They had my one arm pinioned. I fought with my whole body. It seemed to go on interminably. I forgot why I fought. It had been for Paula's life—and then in some extraordinary way it was for him. It was as though I saw him riding headlong into an ambush—and I couldn't reach him—couldn't shout: "Take care. You don't know what you are doing."

They bore me backwards. They were growing angry. One man against a dozen. I must have hurt some of them. A blow caught me clean between the eyes and

sent me reeling and sick against the wall. For a moment they fell back. They knew I was finished. They could wait. My knees gave under me. I slid down—collapsed upon myself like a broken doll. The floor seemed to melt away. And in the black pit where I fell I saw his face, bent over me, white and inexorable.

"Not strong enough, Fitzroy—you see—not strong enough."

Then he was gone.

2

They must have taken me away at once. For I came to in a strange place. At least, it was strange to me at first. But after a little when my aching and confused senses had steadied I remembered. And it seemed to me significant that he should have brought me here. He had chosen his road. Wherever it led him he would follow it to the end.

There was no window. But by the faint streak of daylight from under the door I could see the hollows of the filthy flooring. I could even make out the black stain where the little Quetzelangan soldier had died. A heap of straw had been thrown down for me. Perhaps he had conceded me so much—or someone had felt the indignity to a white man or taken pity on me. But my feet were chained like those of the wretched peons who had trailed past me on their way down to the San Juan mine.

So, like them, I had become dangerous.

I enjoyed a brief, childish triumph. He was not laughing at me now. He was afraid. But that phase passed quickly. I had a glimpse of what his fear involved and I remember struggling madly to my feet and shouting in a voice that cracked and trailed off into a groan and of

dropping face downwards by the door against which I had tried to fling myself. After that my body was a thing apart from me. I saw it lying there in a pool of filth, sometimes inert, sometimes shaken with fever, and I didn't care. My mind had broken loose. It travelled as the mind of a dying man is supposed to travel, over the whole course of my life, seeking obstinately. And at every turn I met him and we fought one another, locked together in a grip that was like the embrace of a terrible love, and each time he was too much for me. And each time I got up and went on. It was Lisbeth I wanted—Lisbeth I had to find.

"We belong to one another," I told him.

He seemed to grow bigger—to blot out the very light. It was like throwing myself against those mountains—or against great embattled walls. I felt that the struggle had gone on from a beginning beyond memory—that there was no end possible, but that I couldn't give up.

I suppose I must have lain there in a sort of delirium for many hours. At least, when the door opened, no light came through save that from a lantern which he held high, illuminating dimly his face and mine. I made some attempt to rise and without a word he lifted me and carried me to my straw bed, setting me down so that I lay half-upright, my head against the adobe wall.

So we remained a moment considering one another.

We must have made a significant contrast. All the signs of struggle and suffering seemed to have been thrown off with the war-stained uniform. He looked composed, icily self-assured. My body lay there anyhow, like a broken thing, and there was drying blood and filth on my face. And yet for once I knew that I was a match for him and that he would never be able to spare me again.

To his perfunctory, "I'm sorry for all this," I answered, "There is no need." And he knew what I meant, and lifted ironic brows at me.

"You drive me to do things I do not wish to do, Fitzroy."

"You drive yourself," I answered coolly. "You're caught in the machine you've made. You're more helpless than I am."

"The smaller a man is, the freer he is," he returned with the same dispassionateness. "If you act, you have to take the consequences. One step involves another."

"Have you come here to philosophise over me?"

"No."

"Or to tell me what you have done with your wife?"

"*You* mean Paula, don't you? She was courtmartialed this morning."

"And condemned?"

"According to the rules of war."

"You and the Baron between you."

"I was not present."

"You wash your hands in innocency. You used to be braver than that."

He remained motionless—almost stockish—his eyes fixed steadily on some point above my head like a man hypnotising himself.

"I warned her. I warned you both. She chose to disregard me."

"When is she to die?"

"It is better you should not know."

I dragged myself on to my elbow, looking up into his face, trying to force him to meet my eyes.

"You're going to save her?"

"It's impossible."

"You'll have no peace for all the rest of your days if you allow this abominable thing."

"I have never wanted peace."

"How can her death help you? If you were afraid of her betraying you to Lisbeth—you know that you need not be afraid again. She could have told her story before now."

He made his first move—a queer gesture of the hand, defensive, painful. He spoke half to himself.

"They say she would not even answer their questions."

"And she might have ruined you—not with the fact that she was your wife—that doesn't matter now—but with that Brussels story. Do you think that German would forgive? He would hate you more than he hates her. And he has a following. You've left Decies in the lurch. You must have lost ground enough."

I was arguing with a shrewd coolness I did not feel. My head felt like a ball of fire. And I was afraid.

His face was still as though it were carved from stone.

"It's too late."

"What do you mean?"

"She was shot two hours ago."

I drew away from him. If he had been hideous—if I had hated him, he would not have caused that physical shrinking. He would have been a devil, alien, beyond my comprehension, a thing almost of indifference. But there was that ineradicable nobility about him. It was like looking at a once lovely face, eaten by a cancerous sore. He had become horrible. And he knew. His eyes wavered and dropped to seek mine and I saw that behind that impassive mask there was an unfree and troubled spirit.

"Couldn't you have waited till sunrise?" I asked bitterly. "Even the worst traitors get that much grace."

"Decies has captured the City. He has sent for me. I rejoin him to-night."

"And you wanted to make sure?"

"There was something else I had to do first."

He offered me a baffling enigma. I felt that he had been on the point of some explanation and had drawn back. But I wanted only to be free of him.

"Well, I'm in your hands. You can shoot me too. You probably will. I don't see how you can help yourself. But, at least, have the consideration to leave me alone. I have the right to die decently. And you sicken me."

"There is a chivalry of the weak towards the strong," he returned with a deadly evenness. "You abuse your position, Fitzroy."

"Leave chivalry aside. You are out of court."

He remained motionless, his arms rigid at his side, like an automaton.

"I don't want to harm you. I have never harmed anyone needlessly—you can insult me—you won't force my hand against you. If you will leave this country at once and promise me never to return or molest us again —you can go. I know that if you promise you will keep your word."

"I'm afraid you'll have to shoot me, General."

"Under what conditions will you go?"

"I will take my wife with me. After that I hope never to set eyes on you again."

"You cannot marry Lisbeth now."

"She is free to marry whom she chooses."

"She is my wife." He gave each word its weight. "She was married to me an hour ago according to the law and the rites of my church. That was what you

wanted. You should be satisfied now, Fitzroy. You should go in peace."

I tried to rise, but a kind of horrible giddiness came over me. There seemed nothing fixed in the universe but that slender figure, challenging me with its immobility. And then in a flash of illumination I saw it all and laughed, and my laughter brought the sweat to his face.

"So it was for that? Why, you're just like any other cheap-jack bigamist, flying to murder as a way out——" I broke off, for insult was beneath my loathing of him and in some strange way he was beyond its reach. "There was a time when the Law meant nothing to you," I went on with deliberation. "You made your own Law. Lisbeth was your wife to you. That was good enough. You may have been right. At any rate, you were a man then. One could respect you for what you were. Now you are a mean coward and a blackguard, making the Law your shield and your catspaw."

"She is my wife," he repeated stonily. "She has always believed herself my wife and now it's the truth. You know her code well enough. If you value her happiness you will go away from here."

"I've done with her happiness. I've thought too much of it. I'm thinking of her peace. She can't live with you now. If she is not dead already you will kill her. I know what's in your mind. You think that once I'm out of the way and the past buried in Paula's grave—you'll win her back—sweep her off her feet as you did before. You can't. You're not the same man. And she knows. She'll know what you've done. Whether you shoot me or not, she'll know. She'll see it in your face—she'll feel it in your touch—she'll smell it in your very breath."

He struck me then—with his full strength. The blood

began to flow again, blinding me. I rubbed it from my eyes. He stood back from me, staring at me with a kind of horror.

"Well," I said. "Why not go on? It wouldn't be the first time you've done a man to death here. And Lisbeth found him—as she will find me."

"Will you leave the country? Will you give me your word?"

"No. So long as she and I are alive we shall meet one another. I shall tell her what you are."

"You drive me, Fitzroy—you drive me. Haven't you understood?"

"I understand that you have damned yourself to keep her—and that you've lost her."

He made no answer. After a moment he took the lantern from the nail where he had hung it and went to the door. From thence he looked back at me, strangely, eagerly, as though even then he half expected some sign from me. But I turned my face to the filthy wall and he went out and I heard the clang of an iron bar falling in its place.

3

Baron von Eisen and two Legionaries fetched me at sunrise. I supposed that I was going to my execution and managed to stand up and carry myself with sufficient dignity. The Baron, shaved, immaculate and official, made a grimace of understanding.

"Not this time, my friend. Later, perhaps."

Some sort of friendly feeling he had for me got the upper hand of his severity. He got me food, helped me to bind up my damaged hand.

"You haf a long ride before you," he explained, "and a live man is easier to carry than a corpse. Now if you

will give me your parole we shall travel comfortably, like gentlemen."

I refused and he nodded a sort of approval.

"I do not blame you. On parole there is no amusement left for anyone. Escape if you can and I will shoot you if I can and no ill will on either side."

"May I know my destination?"

"The City Cartel. I am sorry. It is not a pleasant place."

"Then Marreno has been driven out?"

"Thanks to Decies. A fine soldier though an Englishman. Without him—Na, the General should be re-entering in triumph now."

He must have seen my eyes seeking the hill above us where the ruins of the San Juan hacienda were blackly visible. He added in a low grumbling tone:

"She has gone with him. He had a litter made. He had to go—he would not leave her."

"He is mad. He is risking her life."

"Hm—yes. I fear so too, poor lady."

I think he felt he had said and done too much. He had me mounted with scant gentleness on a Mexican pony, my feet made fast under the animal's belly, my hands manacled. I laughed at him.

"Evidently a prisoner of importance, Baron."

"Of great importance, *Herr Graf,*" he answered with solemnity.

Two Legionaries rode on either side of me. But as we passed through the charred and still smouldering encampment, a second prisoner and guard joined us. In the former I recognised that one-time Lieutenant in the Quetzelangan Army, Alfred Finney, now a woe-begone and battered figure of disgrace. He winked at me. It was a very fleeting wink—a mere drop of an eyelid with

no devil behind it—and it left his face with a look of imperturbable resignation. I think he was glad to see me, for his own sake, and sorry too, as I was for him, but though we rode side by side we had no chance to speak to one another. His cautious "Seems like our funeral procession, Capting," ended in a gasp as the butt end of a rifle caught him between the ribs.

So we returned along the trail which to me was like the thread of an enchanted memory. I could close my eyes and feel her head on my shoulder, and a rush of happiness, such as I had not known since I was a boy, poured over me in a warm flood. Perhaps I was light-headed still. At least, it seems hard to reconcile my real state to the strange sense of exultation that possessed me. My mind knew that there was no hope. Even if Lisbeth could survive the physical trial his ruthless ambition had imposed on her, even if her faith penetrated to the cause of my disappearance, there remained the fact that he would not dare to let me live. I had challenged him and he had no choice. And yet I had for the first time a conviction of my ascendancy. It was like the turn of a tide—that subtle change when in a long bitter struggle a fighter feels the power passing into his hands.

Dawn broadened out into a sultry gloomy day. The sun came up behind the cliffs of wan mountains and drank up the shadows of the deep ravines, emptying them to their grim depths of rocky desolation. It was like the drying up of great lakes whose bottoms were littered with a gigantesque, prehistoric death. Agua's cold pyramidical shadow moved with us, sinister and silent as a ghost. In the world that encompassed us there seemed one living central force. It brooded over us. Wherever else the eye wandered for a moment—in the end it came back, fascinated. In some strange way it forced even

me from my dreams to a troubled wonder. Yet it had always been there—that horned and hunch-back figure—that plume of smoke so steady and unchanging that it seemed like a painted wraith against the hard-blue tropic sky. It was only some trick of sunlight that gave a faint glow to its outer pennants. Imagination—not the wind—carried a whiff of acid-tasting heat against my face. And yet once my pony stopped short, snuffing the air and trembling.

We halted at mid-day beside a stream. Horses and men were parched with thirst, but the water which I remembered for its sweet freshness was hot and tasted loathsomely sulphuric. The disappointment brought about a kind of uneasy exasperation which seemed to affect even the Baron's iron nerves. He became insolent and brutal, bullying his men, who scowled back at him, and whispered sullenly to one another.

But I lay face downwards in the long coarse grass and dreamed peacefully. Lisbeth had passed this way. Where she had gone I was going. I was not a prisoner, but a rescuer. Some great event, like a giant's hand, was closing down on us all. But she and I loved one another and after the way of lovers had become immortal and invulnerable.

In my broken dreams my face was pressed gently against hers. I awoke suddenly. The grass was hot under my cheek. It was as though a living thing under me had quivered and then lain still.

After that there was a change in our relationship. We were less prisoners and captors than a handful of survivors travelling through a vast wilderness the unseen master of which brooded over us with a malevolent patience. As night swept down upon us, blotting out all but the topmost peaks, and the gray column from Fuego

became a red plume shaken by a sinister wind, we drew closer to one another. Disclipine was forgotten. Poor Finney, bunched in his saddle like a doll from which all the stuffing had oozed out, muttered to me unreproved.

"I never thought I'd want to see West 'Am again," he said. "But I do. I'd give something for a whiff of those prize kippers Mary'd 'ave for supper. I bet she's got the shop going all right. She's a first-rater, Mary is. I don't like to think about the way I treated 'er, leaving 'er to it. Not very lively for 'er either, now I comes to look back, that get-up, get your breakfast and your dinner and your tea and go ter bed again. Some'ow one always expects women ter put up with things. Anyway, she's got the bulge on me this time." He sighed heavily. "Not that I'm complainin'. I asked for trouble and now I've got it. Wot I don't like's this spy business. I don't want to be shot for mixing with spies. I never did like 'em. It's a dirty game. But 'ow was I to know? Seemed all right to both of us, didn't she? Rather a good sort, I should 'ave said. And 'ere we are in the soup. Well, to think of us two squeezin' through the Great War and then getting done in by a blasted female."

The Baron's voice joined in through the dark, troubled and sullen.

"You're not the first and you won't be the last, my friends. She got me before she got you—Kurt von Eisen who hadn't cared a hell's curse for any woman. *Ach,* but you should have seen her then. She was beautiful—not pretty—but like a storm at sea—like a regiment on the march with its flags flying and its bands playing. Yes and she could be gentle and her gentleness turned your bones to water. You didn't care what muck-heap she sprang from—it was as though Aphrodite herself took your head on her breast——" His voice dropped. He

was not speaking to us, not to himself, but to the night, to some spirit that he believed walked beside him "It was all a trick. She fooled me for some other man. Yes, she sold her own people for him. She was a devil. Justice has been done. Mere justice. And yet when she walked to that wall you would haf thought—*ach Gott*—we are poor things after all. Our knees shook under us. She was a loose woman—a woman of the streets—it was written all over her—but I could haf thrown myself at her feet. I would haf covered her body with mine from those accursed bullets. And—and I gave the order—and she smiled at me—like she did that night—in Brussels."

He said no more. I could have sworn—if tears had not seemed to incredible to him—that he was crying. My own throat hurt me. For I could see her and the large and gallant gesture of her death. I seemed to look into her mind at that last minute. After all, she had not pulled down the temple in ruins. She had held her hand and covered the confusion of her life with a last fineness. Things were tidied up now and beautiful as at heart she had always wanted them to be. Now she could really be quiet and at peace.

After that we rode on in unbroken silence. At midnight we reached the city, staggering up from one more orgy of internecine bloodshed. The dead still littered the streets—lay huddled in the doorways where they had crawled instinctively for shelter. Men stumbled carelessly over their bodies. There were the illuminations that were always at hand to welcome the latest conqueror.

"Viva il Liberator!"

"Viva il Unitad!"

There was the Liberator's name, roughly marked out in candle-lights, on the façade of the Teatro Nationale.

Very queer it looked in its bald—its almost incredible Englishness. "John Smith." One couldn't believe in it all. It was like a mark covering a face.

A column of Legionaries swung past us. They were the recruits that had just come up from Puerto Madero. They had been blooded, and as they came under the flickering tawdry illumination they lifted their caps and cheered. They were like boys drunk with the joy of life. And yet they were grown men. One of them who brushed against my stirrup was a grizzled veteran. But they were free. He had set them free—not from pain or privation or death, but from the bondage of civilisation, the curse of Law, the curse of order and Brotherhood. He had given them back their ancient inheritance—the right to kill and show no mercy, to risk their lives in their own fashion, for their own ends.

But we had been terribly alone, and I saw the Baron slump in his saddle, watching with a gloomy impatience.

"We are survivals," he said. "We fight. That is our *métier*. But some of us haf begun to think. We cannot help ourselves. I, for instance—soon all these will be thinking too and the joy will go out of them. We shall not fight any more. The last thing will haf been taken from us. And what then? What shall we live for? Can you tell me that, *Herr Doktor?* No, I will tell you. Nothing. So we shall die. We shall not kill others. We shall kill ourselves." He laughed. "Peace—that is the danger."

"One we have to face," I answered.

"Well, you will need all your courage—more courage than I have. *Gott sei dank*—I shall be dead."

We rode up to low grey walls and a barred gateway. A guard of native soldiery turned out to meet us. A

ragged Quetzelangan under-officer took his orders, his little monkey-eyes, bright and inhuman, twinkling at us in the lantern light.

The Baron turned his horse, bringing it alongside mine, facing me. He spoke in a rapid undertone.

"One thing I wish to say to you, *Herr Graf*—something which has puzzled and troubled me. Yesterday I was witness to a strange ceremony—a little priest, half out of his wits with terror and as puzzled as I was and a woman married to her husband—I do not think she was quite conscious. She said your name often, *Herr Graf*—your first name. I tell you this because—na, if I see her—haf you any message?"

"Tell her that I am alive and well," I answered, "and to trust to me."

He looked at me very gravely.

"I will tell her that. We part company here. I regret it deeply." He took my hand and pressed it hard. "In case we do not meet again—I haf enjoyed many hours with you, *Herr Graf*. There are fine fellows everywhere. *Schade*—that we haf to kill one another."

He saluted me with great ceremony, perhaps as one about to die. Finney he did not so much as glance at. Then he rode off, jangling and clattering like some old-time knight-at-arms, into the darkness.

4

For Finney that darkness never broke again. For me it lasted a length of time beyond my reckoning. I became confused so that I could not tell whether we had lived in our inferno for days or weeks. The hours grew monstrous; the outer world faded into a memory—that in the climax of horror became incredible. Had I ever slept

outstretched on a clean bed or eaten food that was not alive with foulness? Had my body ever been free from a filth so indescribable that I dared not think of myself? If so, it was better not to remember.

At first one expected the whole world to rise in protest. I remember, in some half-waking state, wondering who was writing to *The Times* about us. But I had still sense enough to laugh. Probably, no one knew—certainly, no one cared. "A joke" the little American Consul had said wrily. These petty revolutions could at most tickle a world accustomed to more grandiose explosions, to a mild amusement. They occurred too often and were made the more ridiculous by the pomposity of their manifestos. But a tortured man is a tortured man whether he is tortured for the sake of a childish greed or a great ambition, for an ideal or no ideal at all. His flesh is like the flesh of other men.

I never knew how many companions we had in that place with us. There was no window. We never saw each other's faces. We were horrible indecipherable shapes to one another, without personality or humanity. There were crises when only by a tremendous effort of the will could I save myself from disintegration, from melting into that black chaos of desperate appetites, of cumulative despair that became mass madness.

I never knew the extent of our prison. Finney and I were fortunate in that we found ourselves driven back against a wall near some sort of ventilation, and from that spot we never moved. We dared not. To have left its relative safety was to plunge into a sea of bodies, of tossing limbs, frenzied, tearing hands, and as like as not to have gone under in the slime, trampled out of human semblance.

A tall man could not have stood upright. There was

no room to lie down even if we had dared to risk one of those spasmodic outbreaks that passed over the invisible horde like an epileptic seizure. At certain hours—they must have been near daybreak—when a death-like torpor descended upon the maddest—we crouched down, huddled against one another, and slept a sleep haunted by nightmare.

At long intervals a door opened. We grew to crave for that moment, though it was the signal at which the gathering storm of despair and hunger broke with a maniacal fury. A yellow light, too faint to reveal us to one another, strong enough to betray the black monstrousness of our condition, glimmered in the distance. Food was tossed to us. At first, if any came my way I would not touch it. Death seemed preferable. But I reasoned with myself. I meant to live at all costs. I hypnotised my senses so that I could neither smell nor taste.

But there was never enough. It fell anywhere. They meant us to go mad and kill one another. Out of that black sea hands and arms stretched up like those of drowning men. I heard the snap of teeth, snarls that died into a frustrated whimper, the sickening tearing of these ghastly scraps. Once, food falling close to me, a man's teeth buried themselves in my arm. But at the taste of blood he drew back with a cry of horror and self-recollection. Out of the dark a flood of Spanish poured over me, ending in a broken, courteous English.

"For you are English, are you not, Señor? I hear you talk."

We shared together, we three invisibles. He had not touched water for three days and I managed to rescue the pail of foul liquid that was handed in to us, before the last drop was spilled. He thanked me. We introduced ourselves to one another with a solemnity that gave us

back our self-respect. It seemed he had been one of Marreno's Ministers, and had served Marreno from the beginning and been flogged and left for dead by Alvarez.

"But I am not young any more, Señor. One does not escape twice. There is only one talent that matters in this sad country of ours—to know when to desert your friends. Some of us here are traitors. Most of us have been too faithful and we shall die for it."

"Not if the General knows it." It was Finney's voice, quavering but arrogant. "E's English. 'E's orl right, 'e may make 'is mistakes, but 'e won't stand for this, when 'e gets to 'ear of it. It's them dirty Dagos."

But I said nothing. For I remembered John Smith's face. He had chosen his road. And if it led him here, he would not turn back.

"He does know, Señor. But he has come into our country and must use our weapons. They are good weapons. They make no noise. We are like men in their graves. No one will remember us." And then he sighed: "I have a wife and children, Señor."

We fell to talking peacefully in that awful place. From first to last we never saw one another, but I got to know that his wife was beautiful and the names of his children and their quaint ways. He showed me the house they lived in—a lovely villa at Las Palmas overlooking the city. At least, that had been their home.

I knew that he hid his face in his hands.

And then it was Finney who went on—Finney grown light-headed with not much left to him but his Cockney sentiment and his patient Cockney humour. Talking about houses—what about his shop? And beautiful women—well, he'd swap a harem full of them for his missus. "At least, I'd like to tell 'er I would," he hedged. "I'd like 'er to know 'ow I feels abaht 'er and things in general."

Children? Well, there the Señor had the bulge on him. "I ain't got none—none that I knows of. P'raps if I 'ad I wouldn't be 'ere now."

He asked suddenly if we was down'earted? The words were meaningless, but some provocative challenging quality of his voice imposed a momentary attention. That was what he wanted. He began to sing. He had a little tenor, husky, but not untuneful, and he sang as he had no doubt sung at the Canteen behind the lines to the jolly plaudits of other 'go-as-you-please-devil-take-tomorrow' Finneys.

> I'm 'Enery the Eight, I yam—
> Henry the Eight 'yam, I yam;
> I've got married to the widder next door;
> She's been married seven times before.

He made a little circle of quiet about him. He made them listen. He wanted to be listened to. He must have been a success in those old days and it whetted his vanity to feel even these no-good Dagos coming under his spell. The little English ditties, so ribald, or so shamelessly tender and sentimental that you suspected them of poking sly fun at themselves took on a new quality in that place of madness and death. (For Finney himself was dying though I did not know it then.) After all, they expressed something that mattered to everyone, something fundamental. They rekindled a spark that had been almost dead. They subdued, first those immediately around us and then those at the furthest confines of our invisible prison, so that there were times when there was an absolute stillness, save for that husky piping voice.

It could not last. For to the fetid stench there added itself a heat that burnt the body dry, choked the lungs, set the brain on fire. Towards what must have been nightfall it mounted like a fever and one heard the rustle

of bodies, the heavy sighs that threatened a gathering nerve-storm. Then someone would scream out that the Señor Inglese should sing to them, and Finney would rouse himself upon his deepening lethargy and sing.

Until, one night, in the middle of "We'll keep the 'ome fires burning," he broke down and cried.

Then it was whispered from one to the other how the Señor Inglese had a home somewhere in far-off England—a little shop and wife whom he loved—and that he was dying.

They made room for him so that he should lie down. They pressed back so that—God save the mark!—he should have air. Here was somebody's coat for his head. Here was a drink of water that somebody didn't want. In sign of his appreciation—rather condescending appreciation for he never forgot that he was an Englishman and that they were poor devils of foreigners—perhaps knowing that this was his last job on earth and that it must be well done, he would sing, very faintly now so that only a few could hear him.

That was the strange beginning of the strangest community of brothers. Men who had never known or shown mercy now stood back, gave up their turns at the water-bucket, shared their share of food. They threw themselves on the chance to behave like men and die well with the same passion with which they had trampled one another under foot in the effort to survive. It was like a wave of religious ecstacy that lifted out of that scum of madmen Bayards and Sydneys. There were invisible gestures of compassion and courtesy that spread their influence like a breath of pure air.

Through my neighbour it became known that there was a doctor among them and the wounded and sick were passed from arm to arm to me. I could do nothing ex-

cept use to its utmost that blind faith which has been our best stock-in-trade since the Middle Ages. I believe I relieved some suffering. But I now knew that typhus had set in.

"A good weapon," the Quetzelangan had said. It cut us down swiftly, one after the other, like a malignant silent assassin. The bodies near the door were dragged out by cursing and frightened guards. The others, surrounded by men too weak to move or care, remained.

Then into that empestered charnel-house came the final terror. It came twice—the first time softly, light-footed, so that I doubted my own senses. And yet the very dying dragged themselves up to listen. The second time it was as though a giant had heaved his shoulders against the earth under our feet. It rocked—pitching us against one another in a hideous chaos—then dropped back into an immobility more awful, more threatening than the pause between one death blow and another.

For there is a terror which has no relation to death. We knew that the end—if it came this way—would be sudden and merciful. But it was not death we feared—not death that sent us surging against the walls of our prison like a tidal wave caught in a subterranean cavern. It was the sense of titantic forces threatening our world, of things invisible and terrific storming up out of an ancient sleep to destroy what was more to us than ourselves —our earth—the stability of the element from which we came and to which we should return. We might die, but the earth must remain for us to sleep in, like a mother to whom tired children come back for rest.

And the earth was failing us.

I had no measure of time. It may have lasted five seconds or five minutes. I held my own by the same obstinate will to live which had maintained me somehow

from the beginning. I would not die. I was going to her. She and I belonged to one another. There could be no end save our union. But in that stifling dark, reality lost outline, became merged in old nightmares. A great horseman, with visionary eyes fixed on the distance, rode me down. He would not see me—nor would I, inglorious and insignificant, give road to him. And now at last he fought me. His horse's hot body bore me down, the iron hoofs threatened to dash my life out on the stones.

I dared not die here. If I did, one day she would know and the horror of it poison her whole life. I held the thought of her before my failing senses and rallied. She was like a flag flying gallantly, like a war-song that can drag dying men to their feet.

Then it was over. The wave of panic sank back upon itself. Men dropped where they stood, paralysed, cowed, waiting for the next blow which should tear the earth from under their feet, pitching them into a bottomless eternity. I knelt at Finney's side. The Quetzelangan and I had shielded him as best we could, but he was near the end.

He put up a feeble, groping hand, touching my face.

"You tell 'em, Capting—you tell 'em it was a mistake. I didn't 'ave nothing to do with no bloody spies. I don't 'old with spying. It's a dirty game."

The door opened. I heard my name called. I was past reasoning, past questioning. I accepted the liberation as something inevitable—the outcome of my own will to be free. A way was cleared for me. Invisible hands lifted Finney into my arm so that I half-dragged, half-carried him. He was lighter than a child.

I heard the officer in charge make an angry protest.

Then he peered into Finney's face and shrugged his shoulders.

"It doesn't matter now," he said.

5

The two Quetzelangan soldiers took no notice of me. They stood by the barred windows and stared out stupidly, and I saw one of them put up an unsteady hand to wipe the sweat from his face. A strange yellow fog seemed to hang between us, and there was a stillness as of a strained suspense. I fancied that the whole city held its breath.

I eat stolidly at the food they had set before me. I had been given a bath and the clean clothes of a Legionary officer that fitted me near enough—but even so I had caught a grim and startling glimpse of myself. With my swarthy ugliness to which privation and horror and the stubborn resolution to survive had added unfamiliar lines I looked like a strange devil.

I had no ideas as to my future. They had bothered too much with me to shoot me now. If they had wanted me dead it would have been equally effective to have left me where I was. The whole business increased my perverted sense of having suddenly taken fate into my own hands.

I finished and one of the soldiers turned to me. The other remained standing where he was as though transfixed by a stupendous spectacle. Yet he could have seen nothing from where he stood but the sky and the flat roofs of the houses. Neither of them was really aware of me. I could have got up and walked out of the prison. There was something about to happen.

"Una donna," the soldier muttered.

I followed him down a bare stone passage. I did not

know whether it was my dazzled eyes or the queer vibrating light that made the walls on either hand seem to stir faintly like the flanks of a living body.

Sounds of a distant crying came through their muffling thickness and a strange thudding, intermittent and frantic. I thought of some huge tomb in which the dead had come to life and beat upon the closed doors with their piteous hands. And my guide turned and gaped past me with distended animal brown eyes as though in fact spectres were crowding at my heels.

A door opened. The room was like a prison-cell, almost empty save for a table and a chair. A woman rose and came to meet me—a little old woman.

But I had known. I believe all through those weeks I had known and counted on her. Rarely does one shake off the first deep beliefs of childhood and Aunt Geraldine and Miss Cornelious had been my Providence, benign, devoted, and often miraculous. That Miss Cornelious should come to the rescue, beating her way through every obstacle, was what my boy's egotism would have expected of her. And to her I was still a boy.

But at first we did not speak or touch one another. It was only a few months since I had left them both in their shabby, peaceful home, and too much had happened to us. I knew that I shocked her. And she looked very sad and quaint. A tired, heart-broken old woman, you would have said, gathering up her last strength (because someone needed her) and arrayed as any Englishwoman set on adventure, in tweeds and brogues and a felt hat from which the short grey hair hung in stiff wisps.

Very gallant all the same.

And then suddenly some thought moved her and she made a motherly protecting sound, very odd and touching in her, and we were in each other's arms.

We had always been good comrades, rather painstakingly bluff with one another, but now we were both near crying. We murmured absurd, childish tendernesses. In the old days I had been just Euan. Now I was a part of the dead—Aunt Geraldine's flesh and blood.

Presently, she drew away from me and sat down weakly, and we took stock of one another.

"I knew you'd come, Corny."

"My dear—I was glad. I didn't think anyone would want me again. I came as soon as I could get a boat. I left the house just as it was. I expect burglars have got in by now and taken your aunt's silver. But I know she doesn't mind."

"How did you find me?"

She looked grim at that.

"I didn't find you. Not at first. I've been here three weeks. The hotel people didn't know. I tried to find that—that man they call General. He wouldn't see me. I went to every official in this wicked city. I went to the Palace and threatened them with the whole British Empire. Fortunately, the British Consul is a man of spirit and I'm sure there's a gunboat somewhere already——"

That was like her. She was as good as her stories anyway. In her stories geography had never mattered much.

"And then I ran across someone who knew you—a very large, unpleasant German creature who was quite extraordinarily kind and nice, if you know what I mean, and he told me. He told me where and how I could find Lisbeth." She looked carefully away from me—"My dear, I knew everything. And I went to her. I lied and schemed and bluffed my way through all those elaborate defences of his and when I got to her I told her the whole truth."

"Corny, you shouldn't—she was too ill."

"Euan, you are a rotten doctor if you don't know better than that. The uncertainty was breaking her heart. She went straight to that man. I don't know what she said to him. But she came back with the order for your release."

"Did she send a message to me?"

"I have a letter which I am to give you when we are in England."

"She expects me to leave without seeing her?"

"My dear, she begs you to go. All that matters to her now is your safety. If anything happens to you—and he is bad and reckless enough."

"Is that the only reason?"

She laid a withered old hand on my arm.

"Euan, people don't change. Of course, he's a murderer and he tricked her into that second marriage. She was only half-conscious. But she's his wife all the same. She's given him her word. You know how she is built. If I were in her place, I'd run away with you. But you know, there are things Lisbeth can't do—even though they may be sensible and right things."

"He bargained with her?" I said.

"Maybe he did. Yes, I think that is what happened. She wouldn't tell me."

"He didn't reckon with me. I've no bargain with him."

"He will rely on her. And he is dangerous. She warned me——"

"Where are they now?"

"Outside the city—at the President's Villa at Las Palmas. You know, he has made himself Dictator."

"How can we get there?"

"I have a sort of carriage waiting—unless the man has run away. They seem a queer cowardly lot—afraid of thunder-storms."

"Will you go with me—or shall I go alone?"

"Euan—must you go?"

"Wouldn't you?"

She gave a grim one-sided little smile.

"I'm old—I'm tired of life." Then suddenly she flared up. "Nonsense. If I had fifty years to live and wanted to live them all—of course I'd go."

"Then we'll go together."

The door was unguarded. The gates stood open. The sentries of that dreaded prison did not even seem to see me pass. They stood there like men turned to effigies by a spell and down the length of empty street before us I saw what they saw. Fuego blotted out the distance. It blocked the vision like a crested, stupendous figure of evil, crouched and waiting. From its nearer horn the ascending wraith had become a great cloud that spread further and further over the city like a hand opening out grey and silent as death.

A leaden gloom hung over us. The coachman of our ramshackle carriage threw a glance skywards, gathered up the reins, lashing his pitiful animal to the semblance of a gallop.

But though I saw all this, it scarcely touched my consciousness. My thoughts were fixed ahead on this last move in our struggle. I could foresee nothing and yet the sense of an impending event which should make an end, one way or another, was strong on me, and all my strength of mind and body concentrated involuntarily to meet it. The face of my surroundings told me nothing that could matter.

And yet after a while I became more and more aware of them, as a man lost in his own thoughts, will become aware of strange eyes fixed on him. I became aware of the many people in the streets and of their silence. They

stood in groups at the corners, neither moving nor speaking. They might have been overwhelmed, transfixed by a terrible half-realised fear. There was no traffic. Our carriage seemed the only moving thing, and it made a sinister break in that silence, rattling over the cobbles like a hearse through a death-stricken city. The air tasted and smelt strangely sulphuric and suffocating, and the light was fantastic, like the light of a black London fog. It seemed to have no source and there was a gathering darkness overhead, and yet one saw things with a startling clearness. There was a pulsation too as though behind that colourless grey vaulting a fire glowed and died down again.

Miss Cornelious touched my arm.

"Rain," she said. "There's a storm coming."

But it was not rain. I awoke suddenly and completely to the knowledge of a grey falling dust. It was soft and feathery and horrible. Already it had covered the street with a pall and the sound of our wheels had become muffled like the rumble of funeral drums. The Cathedral by which we were passing loomed up through its grey gloom like a gigantic malformed human figure, the great crucifix held aloft in warning and exhortation, the mouth agape, frozen like the vague faces of the people, in an exclamation of horrible foreboding. I could see the altar lights, like the lights of a distant harbour over a black tossing sea, and even as I looked away the cataclysm was upon us. It came down the wide avenue with an incredible swiftness, yet with an appalling deliberation. It was a wave—of the very earth on which we stood. I could see its monstrous undulations before which the houses on either hand wavered and went down. The great crucifix overhead bowed forward slowly in a kind of awful blessing. It fell with the sound of thunder and at the same

instant the wave caught us. Our wretched carriage rocked helplessly like a small ill-built boat in a typhoon—righted itself by a desperate chance. We could scarcely see one another for the dust that was rising up in suffocating clouds to meet the steady downpour of grey ash. The wave had passed on, sweeping the city before it. But the invisible force beneath us began to pound upwards with the blows of a giant sledgehammer. A cleft several feet wide, sinisterly deep, already cut across the chief Avenue and men seeking escape turned back from it with frantic gestures. It was as though after all the earth had been a mere barrier between us and an inferno, and now it was giving way.

I looked at Miss Cornelious. Her face was grey as the air. She pressed my arm. Her voice had a harsh breathlessness that was not of fear.

"It is nothing—only my heart—it's an old heart. Don't bother with me."

We pressed close to one another, like shipwrecked people, in the midst of a mad sea. Men and women, vague as phantoms, broke on either side of our carriage and fled wailing into the obscurity. But there is no escape when the earth fails. They eddied back. They fell where they stood, grovelled or knelt, praying frantically, or whirled about with a horrible resemblance to rabbits, wounded in the brain, who turn and turn upon themselves in senseless agony. From out of the ruined débris of the Cathedral a few black specks, like ants out of a disturbed ant-heap, crawled feebly and lay still. All human dignity, all human pretentions to spiritual supremacy seemed to have foundered as utterly as the city walls. So that the figure that appeared suddenly in the shattered Cathedral doorway seemed more than human. He was in full vestments and carried aloft the Sacraments as though they

had been a banner around which all men must rally. It was a stupendous Elevation of the Host, in the very moment of catastrophe, and the sense of the supernatural, of the miracle of his own escape, sent out a wave of emotion stronger than fear. Even I, partial believer and great doubter as I am, felt how the tide turned, how that frantic bestial panic was swept into a new channel. He was a symbol—the resurrected triumphal spirit—and men flung themselves at his feet, held out adoring and beseeching arms to him as though he carried not only their material safety, but the very dignity of their souls in his uplifted hand. He passed on, exalted and magnified, making the sign of the cross over them and over the ruins to right and left with their dead and dying. He became the leader of a procession of ghosts escaping from a veritable and actual hell.

The earth shook incessantly. Men in full flight staggered and fell, torn by a frightful physical nausea. Above the bewildering and shifting dust a voice lifted itself. It silenced even the cries of those pinioned under the ruins whose dust rose up steadily like the smoke of a hundred funeral pyres. It was Fuego, speaking at last. It was the voice of Destruction itself, whose titanic whip cracked overhead, lashing the air into blinding streaks of light. We cowered under it. The fire that glowed behind the veil of falling ash came and went in red angry spasms. Its heat scorched our faces, stiffened into masks of dust and sweat. Its fumes suffocated us. As a last strange touch of horror, the great buzzards, hovering hungrily in wait, began to fall about us, pitching heavily, with spread lifeless wings, as though they had been shot in mid-air.

We had left our carriage. The coachman had disappeared. The horse lay between broken shafts, its skull

shattered by a piece of falling masonry. Miss Cornelious gently drew herself free from my arm.

"We must keep together if we can—if not—you mustn't mind. You must go on alone."

A Legionary, half-drunk, with the aghast stupid look of someone aroused violently from a heavy sleep, lurched past us with the more and more swiftly flowing stream of fugitives. I caught hold of him and he turned to curse me.

"Las Palmas—that's where we're heading for. The General's there—and you bet he's safe—curse him."

And he shook me off, laughing malevolently.

The stream took us. Through the grey floating haze I saw our companions, women with children locked against their breasts, soldiers who had flung away their arms, men clinging tenaciously to strange and trivial things that they had rescued from their crumbled homes, thieves laden with senseless loot, blind beggars like scraps of driftwood, tossed hither and thither, sometimes thrown outside the tide and clawing the air in agonised desolation, now caught back again and sent whirling on—pariah-dogs with staring ribs and lolling tongues.

And still the priest led. The light magnified him. He became a towering, heroic figure. His vestments spread about him like great bright wings.

From Fuego's invisible crest came the voice and the light. The earth was disintegrating under our feet. At any moment a new crater might form, swallowing the whole city into its flaming bowels. It was for us the last day of the world. There was only one thing for which destruction waited. I had to reach Lisbeth before the end. Until then, in my crazy omnipotence, I believed that I could hold all hell in check.

And then, suddenly, I became aware that I was alone.

Miss Cornelious was no longer with me and sick with fear and remorse I ran back, fighting the tide. I shouted her name, peering into every ghostly face that drifted past me. And at last I found her. She had dropped out and was lying by the roadside on a heap of stones. I don't know why—but she made the whole scene seem crazily unreal. How had she come there, this little old English woman—this quaint fragment of peaceful Stoneborough life? What storm had cast her up into this mad, reeling world? And how unchanged and unchangeable she was. The disorderliness was so much herself—the hat that had fallen off, the tousled hair—so odd, eccentric-looking, but so unconsciously and utterly a gentlewoman to the last. Fuego might turn mountains into valleys. It couldn't make Miss Cornelious less than that.

I remembered how I had met her running that night, in the little lane, her grey hair flying, her fists clenched, her elbows tucked to her side. Now the race was over. She was very small and tired and breathless, like a bird beaten to the ground by a great wind, but she had won.

She had meant to escape from me. But she was glad, in spite of herself, to have me back. She patted me gently and reassuringly.

"My dear, it's an earthquake, isn't it? I wrote about an earthquake once—it's so absurdly like—all but the suffering—one doesn't realise that enough. Adventure. I never thought I'd have a real adventure. You must go on, Euan. You must save her from that man and be happy. Never mind about me. It's just my heart—always a little shaky—your dear aunt used to worry so. But it doesn't matter now. I'm glad—so very glad."

She nestled against my shoulder and in that movement, unconscious and wistful, all the hidden lovableness of her

was made manifest—the lovableness of a child that had grown grey and withered, but had never grown old.

She would never grow old now.

6

For a little while we might be safe. We had slipped from under the claws of the destroyer, intent on a bigger victim, and from the heights where we had fled as instinctively as drowning rats turn landwards we could look back over the grey carcase of the City to Fuego looming, pale and distorted, through its own clouds. They broke with a terribly increasing frequency from the mountain's disrupted flanks, and laden with a black burden of molten rock, rushed skywards and then spread, seeming to reach out at us, cowering on the hills opposite. But at the last moment, as though all the forces of ruin were destined for the City itself, the direction of the blow changed, and only the fringe of ash-laden twilight reached us.

To the west Agua stood out in clear dark outline, a watching partner, spectral and sinister in its appalling quietude.

Men and women dropped where they stood, annihilated by exhaustion. Without exception their faces were turned towards the eruption and their expression was like that of small helpless animals, hypnotised into an agonised inertia by an uncoiling snake. No sound came from them. The very children were silent and tearless.

There had been one half-hearted effort to storm the high white walls that guarded the President's Villa and which seemed to offer a sort of sanctuary, but it was a spent wave. A handful of Legionaries at the gates had only needed to fire over their heads.

They let me pass. (I wore their uniform. At any

rate I was not one of those despised Dagos.) I found myself in a garden which must have been very lovely. Now the flowers lay broken and grey-hued under a layer of poisonous ash. The trees had been stript to skeletons as though they had been dead a hundred years.

A sentry saluted me at the open door. I met the Baron himself in the suffocating floating dusk of the corridor. He stared at me as though I had risen from my grave—then shrugged his shoulders, making a wide and reckless gesture.

"Go on, *Herr Graf*. Do your worst. There is ruin, I think, everywhere."

And so I come to that last meeting. I try to relive it, to recapture its emotional atmosphere, to see it as I saw it then—as a situation beyond tears, beyond hatred or condemnation. I remember all that he was and all that he had done, and yet I should fail utterly if I could not make others realise as I did—and I had cause enough to hate and condemn him—that somehow and above all else he was tragic and alone.

I can see the big bare room and the table set at right angles to the open balcony overlooking the City. I can see him sitting there, in front of a litter of maps and documents (as though the earth were not giving way under his feet), his profile sharp drawn against the unholy light, his arms stretched out in front of him, the hands clenched as though he had tried to lay hold of something that had evaded him. The whole gesture was eloquent of a culminating effort and a sort of bewilderment. I know that even at that glimpse of him my temper changed. I had a clear and final vision of one outstanding factor in our relationship. He might kill me—or I him—but somewhere beyond this antagonism—on some other plane—he and I

belonged to one another. And the sight of his pain hurt me as though I had loved him.

I must have made some sound. He turned slowly towards me and his face became an empty shadow.

"You see, I keep my word, Lisbeth."

And then he laughed a little, at all three of us, bitterly enough, but without malice.

The City that was to have been the nucleus of his fabulous Empire was gone. Thousands who would have been his tools lay under its ruins. His power hung in the balance. But he was thinking of Lisbeth and of her judgment of him. She was the symbol, the very talisman of his existence. And he could not hold her.

After that one involuntary glance I did not look at him. She had been standing against the outline of the wide low window, almost merged in the darkness, and as she moved I saw the expression of her face. It had been one of peace and resignation such as men wear who have done with all demands of life. She had believed me dead. And death was mercifully inevitable and close at hand.

Now she was transfigured. In the terrible and splendid egotism of love we were both caught up by an ecstasy of happiness. We believed that the end was reaching out for us in those increasing blasts of flame and darkness. But we were together and we were free. That stern, half-fanatical rectitude of hers that knew no compromise, even with the forms of honour, recognised the sanction of death. Death itself was nothing. Life had been the unendurable disaster. It was nearly over. And so without a word or gesture we gave ourselves to one another.

In that strange half-light he must have read our faces. He stood up sharply.

"I am still alive, Fitzroy," he reminded me. "And she is my wife."

I answered without looking at him, and in my utter peace I believe I smiled.

"Where we are going marriage won't matter any more to any of us."

"Don't count on that. We're safe enough here. The City has been destroyed three times within the last two hundred years. Las Palmas has survived and will survive again." He turned his head towards the blazing mountain with an indifference that was real. There at least he seemed to believe himself invulnerable. He added quietly: "I'm glad you've got through. Lisbeth would not believe that I had ordered your release. But when all this is over you must go right away. That was my condition. Your little friend, Miss Cornelious, must have told you."

"I never accepted it. Nor did she. She was bringing me here."

"Where have you left her?"

"By the roadside. She is dead."

He heard Lisbeth's exclamation of grief and it drove him to a defence that was like a first uncertain gesture.

"I'm sorry. For she had courage. But I did not kill her."

"You invoke misery and death," I answered, bitterly.

"No—you force these things on me—yes, you two between you—you drive me. But it is not my fault if mad people thrust their hands into my wheels and get hurt. I warned you all—I warned her."

The clouds rising out of Fuego's crest had become blood red. They flowed towards us, filling the room with flickering fantastic shadows. I would have reached Lisbeth's side but that suddenly he strode between us.

"My condition was made to you, Lisbeth. Tell this crazy, stubborn fellow."

"He knows already."

"I know this," I said, "that if I had died you would be free, but because I am alive you are tied to a man who has done murder to keep you."

She did not answer. But I read her tired and pitiful eyes. It was as though she had said aloud, "It will not be for long."

He spoke to us both then, with dignity and a sort of wry wistfulness.

"That's what she called me, Fitzroy—a murderer. But I was a murderer when they carried me shoulder-high through Stoneborough—and when you both loved me. And I killed that man for a lesser cause. You both knew what I was—and what I was, I am. It is you who make new demands that I don't understand. You, Lisbeth—you set such store on little things. Well, I had to give them you. I had to hold you on your own terms. You were my wife—but you had to be my wife according to some trumpery earthly law—and so I had no choice—I would have saved Paula. You two condemned her."

That would have been despicable if it had not been for his deadly sincerity. It was the truth as he saw it and it took him beyond the reach of ordinary judgment.

"We shall not survive her," Lisbeth said.

"Please God we shall," he answered, "and I have your word."

"I shall keep it. Euan knows that. So long as you want me I will remain with you."

"Remain—remain? What will remain of you? Your body? Is that all you think I want? Ah, my dear," he mocked her with a sort of tragic and passionate gaiety, "you're trying to frighten me. But I'll never let you go. I'll have none of that play-acting nobility. You belong to me. You loved me as madly as I loved you. I shall make you remember."

She turned to meet his eyes. She could not help herself. There was the old magic. But across its music there must have sounded one discord upon another, for I know that when he touched her she shrank back from him. And for the firts time her self-control broke down and she cried out to me, fiercely and piteously:

"Oh, Euan—I wish that just you and I could be destroyed."

It was from the heart—convincing, overwhelming. He staggered. I saw his hand go up as though to ward off a blow.

"Lisbeth!"

Even then she pitied him. She made an involuntary gesture of helpless regret.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that—not before you. Forgive me. Let us be at peace with one another."

"I have given you everything that makes life worth living," he said confusedly.

"You have been pitiless," she answered.

"Pitiless? I don't understand. I have had to fight. What else should I have done?"

"What has it brought? There are dead people everywhere—all round us. And now it is all over."

He laughed like a man released from a nightmare. It was as though suddenly he had reached the real barrier between them and found that after all it was a trivial thing. He went to the window. He wrung my heart. He was showing her the world—offering it to her.

"Everything is to begin. Why God himself does for me in an hour what might have taken years. That ramshackle, absurd City is swept away for me. I shall build again—here—in safety—the great heart of Central America. Nicaragua is ready—San Salvador. They will join up with me at the signal. You think I am over-

whelmed by this outbreak. But I knew that it must come. There were warnings enough. I have withdrawn everything and every human being that matters into safety."

"Then," I said "you left those men down there purposely —to die."

He turned to confront me, perplexed, uncertain, attacked from an unexpected quarter and aware of danger.

"They are my worst enemies."

"You would have been merciful to shoot them."

And now Lisbeth came close to me, looking into my face. I think that she saw me as I was for the first time. I knew that he was afraid of her and of that sternness in her. But he held himself finely, sure of himself and his final justification.

"Where have you come from, Euan?"

"From the Cartel."

"Did they torture you there?" And as I did not answer she went on quietly, "How many others were there with you."

"I don't know. I never saw them. It was too dark."

"Were they there when you were released?"

"Yes."

Her eyes were on him. Their fiery blue must have been hard to meet.

"Are they there now—down in that place?"

He assented proudly.

"They were condemned. They were traitors. They were responsible for the death of some of my best men. If I had wanted to release them I should have had a mutiny on my hands. But I did not mean to release them."

"You must release them now."

He shook his head, smiling faintly as though she had been a child.

"I cannot and I would not. It is unreasonable to ask for such a thing."

"It is no time for reason." For now I had remembered my faceless companions, and I pleaded for them—not with him, but with her, as though their lives were in her hands. And he turned to her too, fighting me step by step, torn by a conflict of emotions that gave him a look of gaunt suffering.

"You must not ask what is impossible."

"I do ask it," she answered.

"If I gave the order for their release no one would obey me."

"You know that is not true. Or if it is true—then go yourself."

"You are asking for my death. You wish me dead."

"I am asking you to save yourself."

"I am never safe whilst they are alive."

"Since when have you thought of safety?"

"I took my dangers when they were inevitable," he answered. "I never sought them—but once. And that was for your sake."

"Then for my sake now."

He put up his hand and I saw that he was trembling.

"You think so much of life. You talk of its sanctity. And now you are prepared to sacrifice me; what does it mean? Is there a meaning anywhere?"

"My life and yours doesn't matter," she answered. "But other men's lives—they matter always."

He stared at her as at an enigma.

"You want me to set free a pack of traitors who would have spared you as little?"

She persisted steadily.

"You must."

"Lisbeth—sweetheart—you don't understand. The lit-

tle things confuse and blind you. If I set these men free, they would never rest till they had me down. The struggle would have to begin again. I should be sacrificing my friends to my enemies."

"You can't leave men to die like that."

I could see his bewilderment. To him it was simple and obvious that they should die like that. It solved his problems. Her opposition baffled him—her appeal shook him to the heart. And yet he knew that it was a vital opposition—the whole of her pitted against the whole of him—and that her appeal was the last she would ever make. And as they stood there, confronting one another in that unearthly light of destruction I remembered them as I had seen them that night in her father's house—how even then I had recognised that fierce and elemental attraction which drove them into each other's arms, and which in its essence was an uncompromising, implacable hostility.

"I beg of you—for pity's sake—for all our sakes—if there is to be any peace for us."

"I can't, Lisbeth."

He took a step towards her. I think he meant to take her in his arms—then and there to overwhelm that enemy spirit by the sheer force of his passion. But she shrank away from him.

"You horrify me!"

At that he stood quite still. It was the end—the ruin of his world. I pitied him with the intensity of an inexplicable understanding. He did not know what it was he fought. He knew only that he was beaten. He made a little movement of the hand.

"You break my heart—between you," he said.

So that I also had mattered to him.

He turned away from us both towards the window. A great column of black smoke rose from Fuego's new crater

and spread out overhead like the foliage of a terrible tree. It was growing darker with only now and then a streak of fire to reveal us to one another. And as he stood there I believe that he foresaw the end and knew its inevitableness.

"Will you come with me, Fitzroy?"

I nodded. I knew that he was looking at her. I knew what was in his eyes. And even for her sake I could not have failed him.

My poor companions must have been dead long since. But the issue was not any longer that of their life or death.

He called for volunteers. Half a dozen responded, among them the Baron who, I think, had lost faith in his gods and no longer cared to live.

But half-way down the road back to the City I saw the whole summit of Fuego lift like the lid of some appalling cauldron and the ghastly contents of fire and lava pour down its wrecked sides upon the ruins of the condemned City. Then after that one horrific explosion a night descended upon us, so absolute, that it was like a sudden blindness.

I thought I heard his voice calling to me—challengingly, with the old laughing friendliness, "Fitzroy—a Fitzroy to the rescue!" But that must have been an illusion. For the thunder of Fuego beat down every other sound.

For hours I groped my way through those black suffocating folds—not knowing what remained. Then gradually a faint and evil light returned. Through the yellow haze a strange rayless sun stared down on us and on a world that was like a face ravaged by a terrible disease. Only Agua remained unchanged, standing aloof and spectral in its cynical passivity.

It was I who found General John Smith. He had evi-

dently tried to reach the Cartel and failing that had fought his way into the ruins of an unknown house. The inmates must have all been dead long before he reached them, but he had dragged their bodies out, one after another with a blind persistency. I think he must have felt that if he could only have brought one life to her, that inexplicable spirit which had opposed and beaten him would have been appeased.

But at last a piece of falling masonry had crushed him between the shoulders.

He was not dead, but speechless and with all the power gone from him.

We brought him back to her. He lay stretched out on the rough litter, his slender limbs composed and straight, his face smoothed out into an expression of a lofty and inscrutable serenity. He might have been a knight brought back from an honourable field of battle.

We set him down by the wide window where he had left her and where there was most light and air. And for three days he suffered as few men are called upon to suffer and made no sign. A priest was brought to him and the Last Sacraments administered. He surrounded himself at that end with an extraordinary dignity. It was not possible to believe that he had sinned. To him murder had never been murder, but an inevitable part of the great and only adventure. In his own heart there had never been any doubt or question. It was the doubts and questionings of others that had overthrown him.

Neither did we think of him as guilty. Lisbeth sat by him with her hand on his and though her presence seemed to comfort and please him I think that he had given her up—that he had passed on to wider considerations. I know he smiled at both of us, wistfully, wrily, like a strong man who has been made a game of by children.

But after that his eyes fixed themselves on the mountain beyond the buried City. Its rage was over. It had gone back, exhausted and satiated, to its old silence. A pale wraith of smoke trailed against the placid blue of the sky. And he smiled faintly, in secret understanding and salutation.

And so he died.

EPILOGUE

WE have gone back to Stoneborough. In its great peace it is hard to believe in our own past—hard to believe in the violence of men and nature. An immemorial quiet seems to brood over our English earth.

But sometimes at night I wake up and see Fuego as clearly as though I were back there on the hills overlooking the city. I can see the steady, slender column of smoke that goes up night and day to remind men—who forget so easily—that the old forces are not dead. The ancient fires smoulder beneath the surface and one day they will blaze up again.

And then, strangely enough, I see Old Stoneborough, lying black and extinct under the moon, guarding her wisdom.

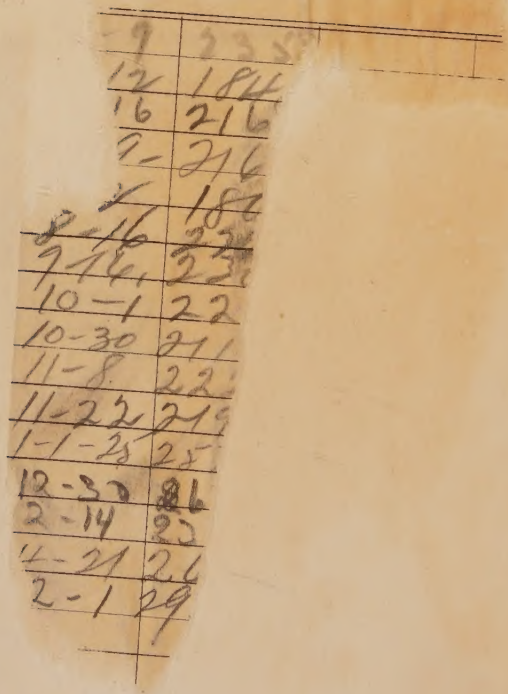
The next day perhaps, in the rather dull faces of my fellow citizens, who seem so benignly and kindlily content, I fancy that I catch the uneasy reflection of some distant glow. And I wonder if they are really satisfied or even if it is well that they should be satisfied.

I remember the old Baron:

"Peace—that is the danger."

One that we will have to face.

But Lisbeth and I love one another.

Whatever comes that is our strength and our safety.

THE END